When Theory and Practice Meet:

The implications of standardized provincial exams in secondary schools in Québec, Canada

Emma Slobodzian

Department of Integrated Studies in Education

McGill University, Montréal

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Abstract

The Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec acknowledges the critical nature of equipping students for the complexities of the 21st century. In doing so they recognize the necessity for education to help "all students develop skills that will enable them to become well-educated individuals, active citizens and competent workers" (MELS, 2007). While the efficacy of standardized assessment practices constitutes significant debate, research on the implications of standardized assessment is less common. Possible implications can be more specifically examined through the lens of teaching and learning as it relates to the ambitions of Canadian education. As education is provincially legislated in Canada, the unique circumstances of Québec educators and the provincial Ministry examinations remain to be explored. This study serves to do just that. Through a qualitative, ethnographic approach this study aims to create a deeper understanding of the implications of Québec's provincial Ministry exams. The study investigates these implications more specifically on secondary instruction, teaching autonomy and student readiness for the future. This research sought to connect both administrator and teacher voices in a way which develops the understanding of the in-school implications of provincial exam implementation on teaching and learning in relation to the goals outlined by the Québec Education Program (QEP).

Data was collected for this study through semi-structured virtual interviews with four administrator and three teacher participants within six Québec secondary schools. A thematic analysis was used to identify commonalities between educator experiences. The findings suggest participants perceive the implementation of Ministry exams to have various problematic implications on teaching and learning opportunities. There are five conceptual themes constructed within the findings. The first theme explores explicit exam-influenced learning. The participants in the study detail the rigorous endeavor of exam preparation which includes exam-specific tools and skills felt necessary to equip students for exam success. The second theme, *Time Starved Schools*, highlights the impact of such extensive exam preparation approaches on an already time-pressed instructional year. The third theme considers the pressure on educators implementing high-stakes exams through the lens of professional accountability and responsibility. The fourth theme, *Conflicting Philosophies of Learning*, speaks to the divide in philosophical underpinnings between present-day instruction and learning and those conveyed

through the Ministry exams. Finally, the fifth theme speaks to educators' ideas of student readiness for life beyond secondary school, and how the Ministry exams fall short in creating opportunities for students to employ highly valued skills necessary for future success.

This study accentuates the lived experiences of those responsible for implementing Québec Ministry exams and how the current approach to such misses the mark in aligning curriculum standards with complementary assessment tools. This study contributes to research in the field of both Québec and broader Canadian education and assessment approaches through the perspectives of educators. Valuable considerations for future research would entail expanding the sample size to encompass more educator voices. Through continuing to connect the network of Canadian educators while highlighting the implications of standardized assessment on teaching and learning, I strive to find constructive solutions to better facilitate student success.

Keywords: Standardized assessment, Teacher autonomy, Student readiness, Secondary education

Résumé

Le ministère de l'Éducation du Québec reconnaît la primordialité de préparer les étudiants aux complexités du 21e siècle. Ce faisant, il admet le besoin d'aider « les étudiants à développer des compétences leur permettant de devenir des individus bien éduqués, citoyens actifs et travailleurs compétents » (MELS, 2007). Alors que l'efficacité des pratiques d'évaluations uniformisées est sujette à de grands débats, les recherches portant sur les conséquences de celles-ci sont moins fréquentes. Les implications possibles peuvent être examinées plus spécifiquement à travers la lentille de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage en relation avec les ambitions de l'éducation canadienne. Les circonstances uniques des éducateurs québécois et des examens provinciaux du ministère restent à explorer, étant donné que l'éducation au Canada est régie par les provinces. Cette étude compte justement faire cela. Grâce à une approche qualitative et ethnographique, elle vise à établir une compréhension approfondie des conséquences des examens provinciaux du ministère. L'étude enquête plus particulièrement sur ces implications au niveau de l'éducation secondaire, de l'autonomie d'enseignement et de la préparation des étudiants à l'avenir. Ces recherches avaient pour objectif de lier les voix des administrateurs et des éducateurs de telle façon à développer la compréhension des enjeux des examens provinciaux sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage vis-à-vis des objectifs établis par le Programme de formation de l'école québécoise (PFEQ).

Les données de cette étude ont été recueillies par le biais d'entrevues virtuelles semi-structurées avec quatre administrateurs et trois enseignants, dans six écoles secondaires québécoises. Une analyse thématique a été mobilisée afin d'identifier les points communs entre les expériences des éducateurs. Les résultats indiquent que les participants ressentent des conséquences problématiques diverses sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage engendrées par la mise en œuvre des examens du ministère.

Cinq thèmes conceptuels ont émergé de cette étude. Le premier thème concerne l'apprentissage explicitement influencé par les examens. Les participants à l'étude évoquent le projet rigoureux de préparation aux examens, qui comprend des outils et des compétences spécifiques estimés nécessaires à leur réussite. Le deuxième thème, les *Écoles privées de temps*, souligne l'impact d'une telle préparation aux examens sur une année d'enseignement déjà pressée par le temps. Le troisième thème concerne la pression exercée sur les éducateurs eu égard aux examens à enjeux importants, du point de vue de la transparence et des responsabilités

professionnelles. Le quatrième thème, les *Philosophies contradictoires de l'apprentissage*, aborde l'écart entre les philosophies sous-jacentes de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage contemporains, et celles véhiculées par les examens du ministère. Enfin, le cinquième thème évoque les idées des éducateurs concernant la préparation des étudiants à la vie après l'école secondaire et comment les examens du ministère peinent à créer des opportunités pour utiliser des compétences de grande valeur nécessaires au succès futur des étudiants.

Cette étude met en exergue les expériences vécues des personnes responsables de l'application des examens du ministère québécois et combien l'approche actuelle est insuffisante pour aligner les normes du cursus avec les outils d'évaluation complémentaires. Cette étude contribue à la recherche dans le domaine des approches d'enseignement et d'évaluation à la fois au Québec et au Canada, selon les perspectives d'éducateurs. En continuant de faire le lien entre éducateurs canadiens tout en soulignant les implications de l'évaluation uniformisée sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage, je cherche à trouver des solutions constructives pour mieux faciliter la réussite des étudiants.

Mots clef: Évaluation uniformisée, autonomie de l'enseignant, préparation des étudiants, éducation secondaire

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Context

Standardized testing remains a controversial topic among stakeholders in education globally. Generally, standardized testing can be understood as the practice of using the same questions to assess responses of a group of test-takers. These responses are both administered and scored in a uniform manner to compare responses of the entire group of test-takers or a particular sub-group. Standardized test questions are typically constructed in a way which elicits an objective response and in parallel can be assessed in an objective manner (Traub, 1994). The use of standardized testing remains prevalent across educational institutions in Canada. In Québec, secondary students write multiple standardized tests in various subjects as a requirement in granting the Secondary School Diploma (SSD).

Ministerial exams are held three times throughout the year and typically account for 50% of a student's final grade. Not only does the exam grade constitute a large portion of the course grade, it is also used at times to moderate the in-class mark granted by the classroom teacher.

According to an Action Canada Task Force Report, "standardized testing is premised on the idea that measuring success and shortcomings will result in greater accountability and drive continual improvement amongst teachers and students" (Després et al., 2013, p.8). While this remains an argument for the implementation of standardized testing, it undoubtedly has received criticism on its effectiveness and impact on student learning. A Québec taskforce report recognized some potential problems with standardized testing. The report states that standardized tests "put too much emphasis on the most easily measured elements of learning, such as knowledge and understanding, at the expense of more complex intellectual mechanisms such as

problem-solving, analysis, synthesis and oral or written expression" (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1997, p. 88).

Specifically, the Québec Education Program (QEP) claims the program supports students' active involvement in learning, content that is focused on issues of contemporary life, and "learning that transcends the boundaries between subjects" (MELS, 2007). While these program characteristics seem to align with current research on student learning and success, relevant research in the field points to potential issues in achieving these goals while using standardized means of assessment.

Statement of Problem

Standardized testing controversy contests that this form of assessment may not be the most accurate measure of student achievement nor the success of an educational program. In a constantly changing world, the requirement to deliver relevant and innovative learning experiences remains urgent. With this in mind, standardized assessment may not accurately represent the philosophies of the Québec government nor effectively assess the values and goals set out in the Québec Education Program. Standardized testing poses the possibility of unanticipated consequences on teaching and learning which can only be examined through those who experience curriculum implementation at the school-level. Teachers and administrators responsible for exam preparation and administration, have first-hand experience in doing so and remain as having vital insight in understanding these impacts.

Necessarily, this thesis aims to develop a multi-dimensional understanding of the experiences school educators have in implementing standardized provincial examinations in Québec. This research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the implications of

standardized provincial exams to determine any benefits or disadvantages when potentially

revising future educational policy. While research on the effectiveness of standardized testing

has been widely conducted, research on the implications of standardized testing is not as

common. This study aims to be a constructive addition to literature in the field of educational

research on standardized assessment as well as in the context of Canadian 21-century learning.

In addition, this study was conducted amid the COVID-19 pandemic which changed the

trajectory of education globally. During this time the Minister of Education Jean-François

Roberge cancelled provincial Ministry exams in the 2020-2021 school year. In the 2021-2022

school year, exams were revised to only contain content set out in the *Learning to be Prioritized*

document distributed provincially. Furthermore the 2021-2022 Ministry exam weight was

revised to account for 20% of students' final grade. These changes to the provincial Ministry

exams allowed for a supplementary perspective in the discussions surrounding the potential

implications of standardized exams in schools.

Research Question

This research will provide insight on the potential effects standardized provincial

examinations have on instruction, teacher autonomy and student readiness for the future. The

driving questions for this research are:

1. What impact, if any, do standardized provincial Ministry exams have on Québec

   secondary instruction, according to secondary school educators?

2. How do mandatory standardized provincial Ministry exams impact secondary school

   educator's teaching autonomy?

3. What impacts, if any, do standardized provincial Ministry exams have on student readiness for the future, according to secondary school educators?

Objectives

There are three key envisioned milestones for this study. The first is to understand the perspectives of three secondary teacher educators, and four secondary school administrators within English or bilingual schools throughout Québec. In doing so, the study aims to gather personal stories, memories, and reflections in an initiative to gain an *insider view* of the realities of implementing standardized provincial exams.

The second milestone for this study is to compare these personal perspectives with those of other participants. This allows for a space to obtain rich data from each participant which we can use to compare stories between educators from different schools and positions who engage in similar practices of exam administration.

Lastly, this study aims to analyze the effects of standardized provincial exams set out by the Québec Ministry of Education on in-school instruction and learning. By examining the personal perspectives outlined by Québec educators, this study will be assessing if standardized provincial exams are having the desired outcome in reference to the expectations outlined in the Québec Education Program.

Layout

This paper will begin with a comprehensive literature review on the history and research surrounding standardized assessment in Canada and Québec, including relevant research on the discussion surrounding the controversial use of standardized assessment. It is followed with a presentation of the conceptual framework that grounds my research through the greater scope of

philosophical underpinnings and my researcher positionality. The paper continues through the presentation of methodology, the research findings, and an analysis and discussion of the findings. The paper ends with a conclusion and summary of the study relative to the focal research questions and objectives. The final chapter includes limitations that surfaced throughout this study as well as future considerations for research to extend the scope of the current study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, I explored the relevant literature surrounding the study of standardized assessment and its possible implications on teaching and learning. This section begins by situating standardized testing in a historical setting globally and in Canada. Through an understanding of the complexities of the Canadian education system, this section continues to explore the place standardized testing holds in Québec curriculum and policy. Afterwards, I examined the prior literature on how standardized assessment affects teaching and learning while acknowledging the conversations surrounding efficacy. At this point, I drew upon relevant studies that have raised questions around standardized assessment on teaching and learning in the context of Québec education. The final section of this chapter discusses the conceptual framework that guides this study including relevant lenses used to construct research design as well as epistemological underpinnings for which my research is based.

Brief History of Standardized Testing

Standardized testing practices have long been relied on as assessment practices across the field of education. Some of the oldest standardized testing practices have been traced back to the 650 CE where Chinese government officials adopted these measures for the purpose of civil-service employee selection. National competitiveness on a global scale was an initial driving force for the spread of standardized testing into the Western world. Following the Industrial Revolution and the rise of compulsory education laws in the late 1800's, standardized testing became a widespread tool adopted by British, European, and eventually American societies. Economic theorists and social scientists commonly refer to the theory of human capital development which posits economic productivity of a nation being linked positively with

standardized test scores (Grineski, 2005; Dagenais, 2011). The capacity uniform testing had on producing time efficient, large-scale assessment of intelligence made it an attractive tool to developing countries. Standardized testing is continually relied on today as means of educational assessment globally. Most notably we can look to the American use of nation-wide testing such as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT), and the American College Testing (ACT) programs. Both exams have been used in the United States as a compulsory tool for placing secondary students in post-secondary institutions since the mid-1900's. American colleges typically curate their own entrance requirement in the form of SAT and ACT scores applicable to all applicants entering their first year of post-secondary education. The realities of the COVID-19 pandemic ignited a shift toward test-optional or test-blind policies in American post-secondary institutions where SAT and ACT scores are no longer a requirement for admissions. Most US post-secondary schools have adapted a test-optional policy where students may submit test scores if they feel it will be to their advantage. Schools have implemented these policies for the 2022 and/or 2023 admissions years, and some permanently. Additionally, some institutions have implemented a test-blind policy where test scores will not be considered even if submitted (Crimson Education, 2021). In 2001, The *No Child Left Behind Act* was provisioned as a means of ensuring accountability in the United States educational system. In an effort toward better educational outcomes through establishing high standards and ensuing measurable goals, the Act required all schools to administer standardized exams in exchange for public funding eligibility.

These nationwide practices are not exclusive to the United States and are seen in most countries with various uses. University entrance exams remain the most common use for this approach to testing. Additionally, these tests are used as means of accountability in schools to monitor where improvements need to be made. Students in England, Ireland and Wales are

required to write General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams following core-subject (Mathematics, Science and English) courses as well as GCSE exams in courses of student choice according to their interest and career paths. In China, National College Entrance Exams, known as the Gaokao, are required for almost all undergraduate studies. Scores from this exam determine which institutions students are eligible to attend. Similar exams are also used in India, Australia, and many South American and European countries.

While national education evaluation and placement practices remain consistent over time, the 20th century brought with it an attraction for international educational testing. Beginning in the year 2000, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) began the PISA exam (Programme for International Student Assessment) as a means of global educational evaluation. This test is written by 15-year-old students every three years in over 80 countries. The PISA exam focuses on evaluation of mathematics, literacy and scientific skills and allows for international comparison of educational results over time. The PISA test is described as a "reliable indicator of students' capabilities" and as a "powerful tool that countries and economies can use to fine-tune their education policies" (OECD, 2019, p.2). Similarly, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) has conducted more than thirty studies of cross-national achievement since the 1950's and most notably the TIMSS exam which tracks international science and mathematics achievement for Grade 4 and 8 students in the United States compared to students in other countries. The TIMSS exams are conducted every four years and allow participating countries to follow the same cohort of students over time. International testing like PISA and TIMSS adhere to the idea of education being a predictor for economic success of a country and in so doing have gained booming global interest.

Standardized Testing in Canada

Canadian education, while like many western countries, cannot be examined in an equivalent manner as education is not nationally governed. Curriculum in Canada remains the responsibility of individual provinces as it falls in provincial jurisdiction. In turn, education in Canada is constantly comparative and as such the application of standardized assessment approaches differ. Each province assesses the needs of their population through a political, social, and economic lens which translate into the educational curriculum. The following table outlines the characteristics of secondary standardized assessment in each Canadian province which consider the grade level in which exams are written, the subject-matter assessed and the weight of the exams on the student's final grade. The information contained in the table has been gathered with a focus of the final three years of secondary schooling across the country and is reflective of the realities up to April 2022. It can be noted that many provinces and territories partake in standardized provincial assessment in earlier years of secondary schooling as well as in elementary grades.

Table 1

Provincial Standardized Exams Written in Final Three Years of Secondary Schooling

Province	Name of Exam	Year Written	Subjects Examined	Counted Toward Students' Final Course Grade?
Alberta	Diploma Exams	Grade 12	English French Science Mathematics	**2020-2021:** Worth 30% of students' final grade **2021-2022:** Worth 10% of students' final grade (Alberta Education, 2022)
Nunavut	Alberta Diploma Exams	Grade 12	English French Science Mathematics	Yes- worth 30% of students' final grade (Nunavut Department of Education, 2022)

Northwest Territories	Alberta Diploma Exams	Grade 12	English French Science Mathematics	2020-2021: Worth 30% of students' final grade 2021-2022: Worth 10% of students' final grade (Alberta Education, 2022)
British Columbia & Yukon	Grade 10 Literacy and Numeracy Exams	Grade 10	English Literacy French Literacy Mathematics	Completion is expected but exam marks do not impact students' final mark. Level of proficiency is noted on transcript. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2022)
	Grade 12 Literacy Exams	Grade 12	English Literacy French Literacy	Completion is expected but exam marks do not impact students' final mark. Level of proficiency is noted on transcript. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2022)
Manitoba	Grade 12 Provincial Tests	Grade 12	English French Mathematics	Yes- English and French worth 30% and Mathematics worth 20% of students' final grade (Manitoba Education, 2019)
Saskatchewan		Grade 12	Required for all courses taught by unaccredited teachers (including homeschooled students)	Yes-40% of final grade (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2020) Grade 12 provincial examinations remain optional, as accreditation has been extended to all teachers for the 2021-22 school year. (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2021)
New Brunswick	Grade 10 &12 FSL	Grade 10 *(10% students sampled)* Grade 12	Oral French Proficiency	Completion is required for graduation (minimum score required). (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021)
	Grade 10 French Immersion	Grade 10	French Literacy	Completion is required for graduation (minimum score required). (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021)
	TCLÉ* – Test de compétence en lecture et en écriture TCN* – Test de compétence en numératie	Grade 10	French Reading and Writing Numeracy	Completion is required for graduation (minimum score required). (Ministère de l'Éducation et du Développement de la petite enfance, 2021)

	**Francophone boards only			
Nova Scotia	Nova Scotia Examination	Grade 10	English or French Mathematics	Yes- worth 20% of students' final grade (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021)
Prince Edward Island	Secondary Mathematics Assessment (SMA)	Grade 11	Mathematics	Yes- worth 20-25% of students' final grade *depending on the course taken* (Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Lifelong Learning, 2018)
Newfoundland and Labrador	Public Examinations	Grade 12	English French Science Social Sciences Mathematics	Yes- worth 40% of students' final grade (Newfoundland and Labrador Education, 2022)
Ontario	OSSLT	Grade 10	Literacy	No- Completion is required for graduation. (EQAO, 2014)
Québec	Ministry Exams	Grade 10*	Science History Mathematics	Yes- worth 50% of students' final grade (Ministère de l'Éducation Québec, 2022a)
		Grade 11	English French	Yes- worth 50% of students' final grade (Ministère de l'Éducation Québec, 2022c)

* Québec secondary schools operate from seventh to eleventh grades and as such high school diplomas are awarded after eleventh grade.

As this study was conducted, the Northwest Territories reassessed their curricular requirements following a 2021 analysis of curriculum renewal. At this time, it was decided to move forward following the curricular requirements of British Columbia and in doing so, the exams would no longer be counted towards students' final grades (Government of Northwest Territories, 2021). Similarly, the 2021/2022 school year prompted a shift in assessment practices in Manitoba which outlined the end of Grade 12 exams with an intention to develop Grade 10 assessments as an alternative (Manitoba Education, 2021). It can also be noted that all ten Canadian provinces have been reported to participate in the global competence assessment of the PISA exams (CMEC, 2019).

In Québec, Grade 10 exams are written in what is considered *content-based* courses whereas the Grade 11 exams are written in *language-based* courses. Students cannot receive a final course mark that is lower than that of the Ministry exam, but Ministry exam marks can alter school-given marks in instances where moderation is deployed.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, provinces assessed the needs of students and altered the exam schedules accordingly. In Québec, the 2020-2021 school year Ministry exams were canceled throughout the province. This was followed by a briefing released by the Ministère du l'Éducation providing educators with an updated curriculum, prioritizing certain knowledge to account for the continuous changing school year. As the realities of the pandemic continued into the 2021-2022 school year, the exams remained intact but instead were reduced to weighing twenty percent towards the final grades of students.

Fundamentally, the approach to standardized assessment in Canada is vastly unique to each province. In such, it is crucial to acknowledge the inability to generalize at a national level. Multiple variables of subject matter, grade-level when written and weighting of exams all must be considered when analyzing the effects on teaching and learning. The current implications associated to the COVID-19 pandemic have and continue to change the realities of education and standardized assessment in Canada. The widening complexities of the research subject may indeed shed light on fundamental arguments, but a critical approach to this study will remain in connecting the realities of the implementation of standardized exams with the curricular program it aims to assess.

Québec Curriculum and Evaluation

To better comprehend the place and purpose of standardized exams in Québec, an understanding of curricular and policy aims is critical. This section analyzes the purpose for

assessment as outlined in policy, the value placed on standardized tools and its relation to curricular goals. Following the Parent Report in 1964, Québec transitioned from allowing individual schools to dictate curriculum to the initial establishment of a Ministère de l'Éducation. The Parent Report was notably drafted by the Parent Commission who were joined to respond to the ongoing qualification and labor needs that the current system could not meet. The Parent Commission was composed of multiple actors from the varying linguistic, ethnic, and religious communities, both public and private sectors and included university and business representatives. The extensive report outlines the issues in the current system and proposed suggestions for educational reform. Its aims were centralized around the democratization of education to promote equal access to all students. In doing so, they established the Ministère de l'Éducation, which took educational decision making out of the hands of religious and cultural-linguistic groups that previously governed individual schools. While standardization of education was apparent predating the 60's, the reform at this time created an environment for standardization in the name of democracy.

In 1996 and 1997, the Ministère de l'Éducation drafted a plan of action for reform of the education system and in doing so mandated an evaluation by the Task Force on Curriculum Reform led by Paul Inchauspé. This was done both to examine places of curricular improvement and provide suggestions moving forward. Reasoning for the reform was rooted in the idea that knowledge plays a large factor in the social organization of society and that schools are expected to act as agents of social cohesion (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1997). The new reform wished to place more focus on the cognitive objectives of schooling, citing mastery of knowledge to be more necessary than ever. At this time, a motion to deviate from rote learning in favour of a

more constructivist approach to learning was introduced and a call for re-evaluation of assessment tools to meet this new need was enacted.

The curriculum was criticized for the lack of professional autonomy given to teachers pushing toward a cycle-based system to remedy this. Cross-curricular learning skills were also introduced at this time placing value on intellectual, methodological, social and language skills. These additions allowed for a collaborative emphasis to highlight the progressive nature of learning throughout students' schooling. Inchauspé outlined that prior to 1980, evaluation was not a focus of the Québec curriculum and was not "considered to be an integral part of teaching, and received little, if any, attention in teacher training programs" (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1997, p.86). The report highlighted the functions of evaluation to: "support progress in student learning, after a significant period, establish a summary of progress and the extent to which learning has been mastered, regulate the system, to provide an opportunity to correct observed weakness, and to influence the development of learning and lastly, to report to the population and provide information on the state of education" (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1997, pp. 86-87). The distinction between formative and summative assessment became apparent at this time relaying that "we should be measuring what we value, rather than valuing what we measure (Ministère de l'Éducation ,1997, p.88). The Task Force recommended a shift from objective evaluation for open-ended questioning to better reflect the targets of the reform.

Notably, this publication suggested an external examination to be introduced for the end of Secondary III or ninth grade to assist students in making choices regarding their academic future. The Task Force recommended that exams be marked locally to recognize the importance of teacher judgment in evaluation, which was said to have been replaced previously with a narrow measurement-based focus. The discussion of transparency and public interest in

education remained a nuclear force in the decision to continue with the administration of

Ministry exams. The value of the secondary diploma remained a priority in Québec education

while a push toward revitalizing the approaches of the learning to more widely adopted teaching

practices was enacted. Following the Task Force Recommendation, *Québec Schools on Course*

was published acknowledging the suggestions for the new reform. A vague recognition of the

evaluation needs was made specifically in that they would consider a more balanced approach to

move away from objective examinations. At this time, new Secondary IV (Grade 10) exams

were introduced for Physical Science, Mathematics and History accompanying the Secondary V

(Grade 11) English language, French language, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and

understanding the contemporary world courses.

The *Policy on Evaluation of Learning* (2003) splits the purpose of evaluation into two

categories: "1) evaluation to support learning and 2) recognition of competencies (normally done

at the end of a cycle)" (p. 35). Evaluation to support learning requires accurate and actionable

feedback to students, improving the development and learning. Whereas the recognition of

competencies allows for evaluation of students' abilities to successfully demonstrate competence

in the areas of focus as set out in the curriculum. Ministry examinations outlined in this policy

lend themselves to the recognition of competencies. The policy outlined the purpose of Ministry

examinations as evaluation:

> They are designed to verify the level at which students have developed the competencies
>
> according to the outcomes prescribed by the education program. These situations include
>
> complex tasks that generally involve elaborate productions carried out for varying lengths
>
> of time. They make it possible to verify to what extent students can mobilize the

resources, including knowledge, that the competency requires. (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2003, pp. 38-39)

The mission of schools in Québec was renewed in the 2017 *Policy on Educational Success* to: "provide instruction with renewed conviction", "socialize and prepare students to live together in harmony" and, "provide qualification through a variety of options" (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2017, p.25). At this time, the Ministry had clearly acknowledged the adherent skillset that the 21st century requires of society. A renewed conviction for re-examination of competencies and implementation is present while referring to preparation for the future, a versatile and qualified workforce and responsible citizenship (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2017). As previously mentioned, the realities of the educational system changed drastically from 2020-2022 with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. With this, the government recognized the strains placed on the educational system and the inability to proceed in line with previous years. Ministry examinations were a focal point of interest at this time whose presence was not seen as conducive to the situation at hand. In 2021, the Ministry released the *Revitalization Plan for Educational Success* which made specific mention of a reflection on the learning evaluation process, including ministerial examinations to ensure students' needs are served effectively (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2021).

Fundamental Issues with Standardized Testing

Assessing the Whole Student

While standardization remains in wide-scale application, many argue that standardized testing as an evaluation tool for learning is not an accurate measure of student abilities. What many refer to as a *snapshot in time*, standardized testing lacks in its ability to only capture a small period in the learning process. There are many factors that can influence test scores and

critics suggests that standardized tests do not always reflect individual student learning. The nature of such testing instead can only provide insight on how students fare on that assessment on the given exam days (Kempf, 2016; Harris et al., 2011). Through the 21st century, society reconceptualized the differences in student learning and that such standardization of education does not merit an equitable approach to teaching and learning. Research from Arlo Kempf in Canada and the US suggests language learners and students with exceptionalities, "face unique and substantial disadvantages in and around ST [standardized testing]" (2016, p.158). Very prominently, standardized exam formats do not take into consideration students with additional learning needs, nor do they account for the social-emotional conditions associated with learning. Kempf echoed this in their research stating, "survey and interview results powerfully flesh out the persistent ways in which issues of class, race, culture, and language become further enlivened as markers of advantage and disadvantage as a result of ST [standardized testing]" (2016, p.158). Darling-Hammond, and Adamson (2014) also speak to the ways in which standardized testing increase inequity stating, "because teachers tend to teach what is tested, especially when high-stakes are attached to the scores, the expansion of multiple-choice measure of simple skills has narrowed the opportunities for lower-achieving students to attain the higher standards" (p.312). While these shortcomings of this approach to assessment are being more widely considered, reliable solutions have not been widely enacted.

As education progresses and evolves throughout history, Western society has begun moving away from the traditional model of teaching to a more interactive approach inspired by constructivist perspectives on learning. Methods of this approach include instructional procedures like project or problem-based learning (PBL) which positions itself as an "active student-centred form of instruction which is characterised by students' autonomy, constructive

investigations, goal-setting, collaboration, communication and reflection within real-world practices" (Kokotsaki et al., 2016, p.1). Empowering students to take charge of their learning through projects and relatable situations allows for the transmissibility of knowledge and the creation of deeper learning that exists beyond the classroom. David Leat (2017) outlines in his research on equity and problem-based learning, "if we believe that the curriculum can shape society, then a curriculum in which students both develop their own agency and see the value of others through deeply collaborative work offers more scope for combating both the causes and the effects of inequality" (p.19). While these approaches to instruction are aimed at eliciting an extensive practical application outside the classroom, the qualities of summative standardized assessment do not provide the scope to encompass and truly assess these activities. Without a clear connection of instruction and assessment practices, the benefits of instructional approaches such as project-based learning will be overshadowed by teaching to the test. Approaches to ameliorating inequities exacerbated by standardized testing are focused on alternative approaches to assessment as proposed by Kempf (2016):

> Teachers' voices can guide us toward more appropriate strategies (including peer-group research projects, student work portfolios, oral and written communications, and students as instructors), which far surpass the abilities of standardized tests to determine and measure learning and achievement… Learners are best guided by frequent, real-time support, and timely feedback from teachers, peers, and where possible, community members, and outside experts. (p.190)

Experts on culturally-responsive assessment for Indigenous students also advocate for alternatives to standardized assessment. Formative assessment approaches prove to be accurately aligned with the needs and motivations of Indigenous students:

In the realm of classroom assessment, formative assessment has gained currency-boding

well for Indigenous students, because formative assessment by its very definition is

closely aligned with classroom instructional content and processes… this form of

assessment has the potential for greater validity than any standardized educational

assessment because it can take any form that engages a student. Thus, it is more likely to

elicit information about his or her learning. (Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019, p.8)

Such issues of educational inequity and culturally-responsive assessment are increasingly

relevant in the context of standardized testing and must be considered in the discussion around

student assessment in a way that is advantageous for the 21st century classroom.

Teaching to the Test

Many critics of the standards movement have expressed that the current standardized

tests further increase the pressures on teachers to teach to the test (Elmore, 2002; Gordon, 2005;

Gordon, 2009). This idea, also known as *test-wiseness*, relays that there is a need to teach test-

taking skills or specific topics for exam success. While test-wiseness was viewed as an asset

prior to the 20th century, it has been questioned as not being conducive to current best teaching

praxis. This lends itself to the idea that classroom teaching practices are not sufficient in

preparing students to sit exams and that time must be dedicated to teaching students how to find

success on exams. Teachers are not specifically allocated time for exam preparation and studies

propose that some teachers focus much of the second half of the school year on test preparation

activities (Meaghan & Casas, 1995, as cited in Després et al., 2013). In doing so, a common

finding is that teachers tend to focus their instruction on tested content areas at the expense of

non-tested content and enrichment activities (Abrams et al., 2003).

Standardized assessment increases the focus on a narrow range of subject areas and activities thereby restricting curiosity and creativity of students (Kempf, 2016; Sahlberg, 2010):

In particular, the arts, physical and health education, social sciences, and in some cases science education are marginalized. TOTL [Test Oriented Teaching and Learning] relies on an overly narrow toolkit of teaching and learning strategies, to the exclusion of student-centered practices such as differentiated instruction, whole child education, and other critical approaches." (Kempf, 2016, p.165)

Teaching to the test is consequently less favourable to greater curricular implementation and improved teaching practices. Not only does this approach to teaching affect the content and learning experience of the students, but many also argue that it impacts teachers' freedom in the classroom. As observed in a study by Copp (2019), there was a strong correlation between Canadian provinces that partake in large-scale assessment (LSA) practices and the use of teaching to the test strategies, noting that in doing so non-LSA classroom assessments are being altered to mirror the formatting of provincial exams.

High-Stakes Nature

Additionally standardized exams are historically a high-stakes tool used as a requirement for secondary graduation or post-secondary admissions relaying that the stress for both students and educators cannot be separated from the assessment. Previous studies have raised concerns in this regard noting the increased levels of anxiety, stress and fatigue of students and educators partaking in high-stakes assessments (Abrams et al., 2003; Copp, 2019). While some argue the presence of stressful situations cannot be avoided entirely as they mimic similar pressures of the workforce, it remains an unfavorable consequence. Researchers reported secondary educators

who administer high-stakes exams often feel overwhelming external pressure to ensure their students' success (Göloğlu-Demir & Kaplan-Keleş, 2021; Von der Embse & Hasson, 2012, Looney, 2009; Goldberg, 2004). Additionally, studies suggest high-stakes testing increased stress and lowered morale among teachers (Jones et al., 1999; Abrams, 2003). Such exams have significant impact on academic standing, ability to graduate and post-secondary options (Copp, 2018, p.478). This pressure also translates in how a teacher or administrator is viewed as being competent in their careers where low scoring grades become a reflection on the teaching abilities of educators.

Political Agendas

The previous arguments surrounding standardized assessment are widespread and certainly not new as research on the effectiveness of standardized exams predates the 20th century (Lippmann, 1923, as cited in Perrone, 1977). Beneath the surface, there are other considerations that are critical in understanding the use of standardized assessment. Although education is fundamentally a social function, it takes place in institutions that are governed directly by government policy. To separate the social heritage of learning from the prominent political influence in curriculum would be implausible. The political influence on education is undeniable along with the pushes of political agenda on policy. This bears the question of who is curriculum built for and for what purpose? Politicians wield education as a bargaining chip in elections along with health care and social services. Political leaders favour large-scale standardized assessment as a means of publicizing the success of a provincially governed curriculum to voters. Thus, in examining the concerns surrounding standardized exams as assessment we must consider what exactly is being assessed.

Within Québec Context

The degree to which the previously documented implications of standardized exam implementation are embodied is highly unique to the system that the exam is being used to assess. In the context of Québec education, the impacts of standardized Ministry exams were examined in a study of seven secondary mathematics teachers in a Québec private school. In his study, Elbling outlined concerns of accuracy and reliability of these assessment methods: stating that:

> Most participants believe that multiple-choice and short-answer questions, specifically, do not accurately measure student ability or proficiency for a multitude of reasons" and that the provincial mathematics exams, "promote "test-learning", timed mathematics performance, and/or "regurgitation" which participants feel are all different than deeper conceptual understanding that we should be trying to assess. (Elbling, 2019, p.108)

Participants in his study acknowledged a conscious effort against teaching to the test but noted that the redundancy of exam questions make the use of old exams as practice a viable option to prepare students. Student motivation and stress levels of high-stakes examinations were examined and contrary to various studies, some participants stated that students were typically motivated by exams. Elbling noted the proclivity of students at this specific school to do well on Ministry exams as a potential factor for this. Throughout his research, Elbling called into question how the Ministry exams in Québec aligned with the goals of the curricular program. In reference to the goal of supporting progress in student learning, his finding outlined participants felt the exams do not successfully support student learning and that, "many think the existence, nature and format of exams actually lead students to learn less effectively" (Elbling, 2019, p.

111). This study constructively opened the doors to conversation in the relevant field of study

through recognizing the unique parameters of Québec education situated in a global context. This

study reveals some mirroring regarding the concerns raised in Québec with research from other

parts of the world. The nature of his study lent itself to a smaller sample size, localized in

mathematics at one school to which the avenues for expansion are vast. His recommendations for

the addition of a larger sample size including more representation of Québec schools and

educators are ones which I aim to build off with my study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of a study is the unraveling of the process that ensued,

ultimately explaining decisions that lead to conducting the study in a meaningful way. According

to Ravitch and Riggan (2017), a conceptual framework "serves as the superstructure for the

work" in a way that compiles "researcher's personal interests and goals, which in turn are shaped

by the researcher's identity and positionality" and critically provides the researcher with previous

arguments to allow for new questions, considerations, and explanations into inquiry (p.30). The

conceptual framework seeks to focus on relevant works that provide context for research design

and findings.

As such, the previous section conceptualizes the framework in which my research was

built on. While the debate on the fundamental effectiveness of standardized assessment is crucial

in understanding the field, it is not enough to initiate change in a constructive way. As a

researcher, I dwell in the space between interpretivist/constructivist and critical perspectives.

Interpretivist as a means of exploring the given issue (if any), and critical as aiming to create a

steppingstone for action although the scope of the study itself will not elicit specific actions. The

questioning evoked through my research moves beyond the argument of if standardized exams should be used but how the implementation of such unfolds in the classroom from those experiencing it. In a way, it ignites the barrier I personally felt when speaking with colleagues in the field. I found myself questioning why it seemed so difficult to implement teaching methods learned in teacher training once positioned in a real classroom. Through an exploratory dive into past research and current aims of educational policy in Québec, the concepts of teacher autonomy, 21st century learning and student readiness became the nuclear lens in which I sought to examine this field. They lend themselves to the interpretivist paradigm in seeking to construct knowledge through experience and uphold a critical essence through dissecting lived experiences for future considerations. My conceptual lens interlocks harmoniously with ethnographic practices by exploring the realities of lived experiences by those in the field while keeping change as an objective goal. The following sections will delve further into the concepts that serve as the superstructure for the work.

Teacher Autonomy

Teacher training programs express the importance of intertwining theory and practice in the classroom. Since standardized exams in Québec hold weight for students receiving their diploma, teachers feel the pressure to ensure student success on these exams. By placing incentives on student exam performance, we reduce instruction to test preparation, thus limiting the range of educational experiences to which students are exposed and minimizing the skill that teachers bring to their craft" (McNeil, 2000; Smith, 1991, as cited in Abrams et al., 2003, p.20). Although teachers may be highly qualified to create rich learning experiences, these factors may enable them to reconsider their goals for the school year. This tension between the theories that

built their teaching philosophy and the constraints implied by standardized exams may infringe

on their ability to implement theory into practice. Research suggests that this may, in turn, lead

to a de-professionalization of teachers (Abrams et al., 2003). While interviewing educators in

Canadian schools, a principal from Saskatchewan explained:

> In the utopia where it was designed, the questions were supposed to reflect the
>
> curriculum. But when you have a teacher, it took away the autonomy from the teacher in
>
> terms of interpreting the curriculum and implementing it the way it should be. They
>
> ended up implementing it the way the test dictated it, the way the questions did. And I
>
> felt that was kind of limiting. (Copp, 2018, p. 483)

Educators are trained to be professionals in the field; experts who have spent countless

hours perfecting their craft. Not only does this beg the question of infringement on the

responsibility one holds in the field, but minimized professional autonomy is linked to other

implications to the field like teacher attrition.

21st Century Learning

The concept of 21st century learning is acknowledged by educational leaders in many

parts of the world. The idea that students in the 21st century require complex and compounding

skills that are needed to live in an evolving world and is reiterated in policy publications by the

Ministère de l'Éducation in Québec. The following framework of knowledge for 21st century

learning was coined by researchers from Michigan State University which has provided context

for my research under this lens.

The framework can be broken down into three categories which then are categorized

further. Twenty-first century learning constitutes three types of knowledge (See Figure 1):

Foundational Knowledge (to know), Meta Knowledge (to Act) and Humanistic Knowledge (to value). This framework reflects the lens I have adopted in my study as it connects the common themes in relation to curriculum and standardized assessment. Foundational Knowledge: explained as "What do students need to know?", consists of: a) core content knowledge; b) cross-disciplinary knowledge and c) digital/ICT literacy. This most closely reflects the foundation of curriculum documents. It entails, for example, the ability to apply mathematical or scientific ways of thinking to everyday situations, the interplay of different fields of knowledge being used in new contexts to construct meaning and problem solve, as well as the ability to "thoughtfully evaluate, navigate, and construct information using a range of digital technologies" (Kereluik et al., 2013, p.130).

Meta-knowledge answers the question of how students work with their knowledge. This is broken down into a) problem solving and critical thinking; b) communication and collaboration; as well as c) creativity and innovation. To problem solve and think critically is to interpret information and make informed decisions about the information but also to make decisions effectively in part of resolving a specific problem. Attaining the ability "to clearly articulate oneself through all media of communication- oral, written, nonverbal, and digital" as well as active and respectful listening and flexibility, and interest in participating while maintaining importance with both individual and group success. Creativity and innovation entails applying various skills while generating novel and valuable outcomes.

Humanistic Knowledge answers the question of "how does student knowledge reflect in a broader social and global context?" Humanistic knowledge encompasses three subcategories: a) life skills, job skills, and leadership; b) cultural competence; and c) ethical and emotional awareness. Life and job skills represent the ability for one to take classroom learning and

translate it in society and "serve to effectively manage and organize one's efforts, coordinate and

organize relevant information and development of the end product" (Kereluik et al., 2013, p.

131). To be culturally competent is to effectively communicate, collaborate and appreciate ideas

and emotions of a multitude of individuals. This framework allows dissecting the different types

of knowledge students in today's world hold and can open the floor to where importance is being

placed and highlight what is being overlooked.

Figure 1

Synthesis of 15 Different 21st Century Learning Frameworks
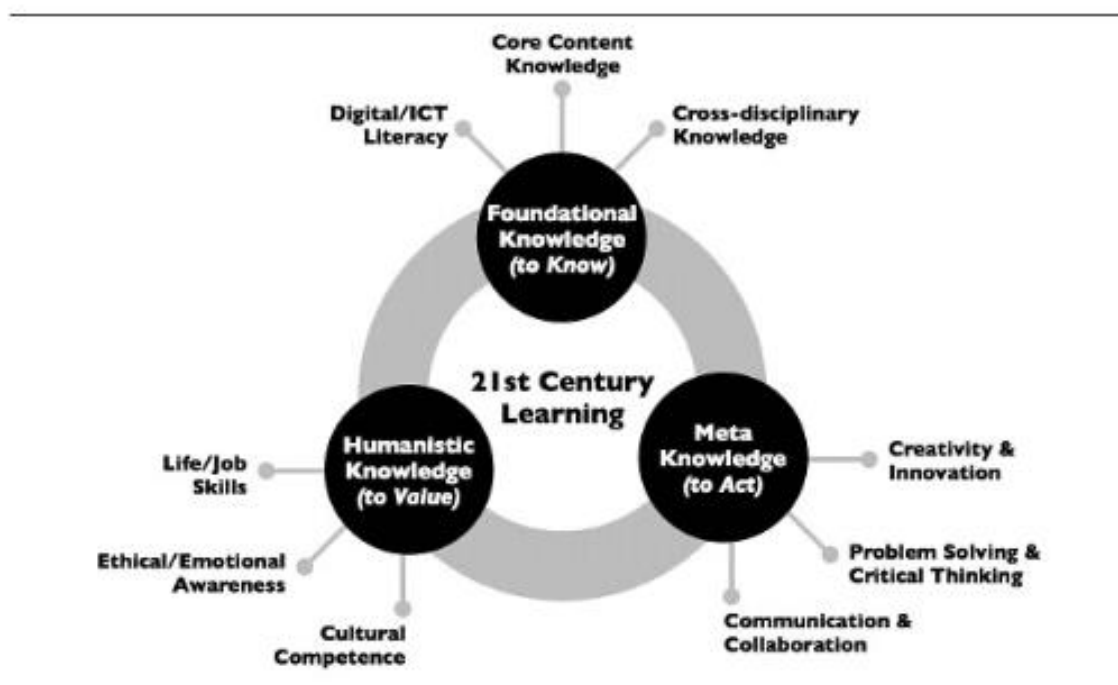
Figure 1. Synthesis of 15 different 21st century learning frameworks into one visual image.

Note: Synthesis of 15 different 21st century learning frameworks into one visual image. Reprinted from "What Knowledge Is of

Most Worth: Teacher Knowledge for 21st Century Learning," by K. Kereluik et al., 2013, *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher*

*Education, 29(*4), 130. Copyright [2013] by the International Society for Technology in Education. Reproduced with permission.

Student Readiness

Future members and leaders in society must be equipped with the skills, dispositions and knowledge that are essential in the 21st century workplace (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016). The concept of student readiness that is reflected throughout this study is often referred to when considering student achievement, curriculum goals and broader ideas of social goals for society. Educational policy researcher and professor Paul Bennett explains that "putting students first should be the highest priority, and that means ensuring that high school graduates are reasonably well-prepared with the capabilities and skills to lead a full and productive life" (Bennett, 2020, p.168). These sentiments echo throughout the educational field, but the specifics of the capabilities and skills required remains subjective.

Research acknowledges that "at the secondary level, government bodies have developed and implemented policies and standardized assessment instruments with the expressed means of improving accountability and student academic proficiency. Despite these efforts, there does not appear to be a perceived change in the readiness of students attending tertiary institutions" (Beaubier, 2012, p.109). Policy makers continue this narrative when speaking to curriculum development and implementation but notably get lost in the aim for higher levels of secondary graduation rates. Although graduation rates trend upward in most Canadian provinces, researchers ask "whether rising levels of diploma attainment are actually the best way of measuring achievement levels" (Bennett, 2020, p.168). While it would be intuitive to assume that the awarding of a secondary school diploma would accompany an assurance of student readiness for what is to come, research points that the two are not always synonymous.

Coined as the *Big Disconnect* in Canadian education, researchers explain that "student graduation rates represent educational attainment levels; they often do not align at all with

assessment data testifying to student *achievement* levels from province to province" (Bennett, 2016, as cited in Bennett, 2020, p.170). The disconnect between the two has led to debate of the legitimacy of the secondary school diploma regarding student readiness. In reference to the 2009 Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation Report entitled *Persistence in Post-Secondary Education in Canada* conducted from 2006-2009, "14 percent of university students dropped out in their first year. Among the most common identified causes were failure to meet deadlines, poor academic performance, and inadequate study habits" (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009). Likewise, in 2009 the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) conducted a survey with university faculty where more than half of the professors surveyed stated students were increasingly less prepared from prior years. The noted concerns mention "lower maturity levels, poor research skills and expectations of success without the requisite effort" (OCUFA, 2009, para. 3). McKinsey & Company (2021) explored fifty-six foundational skills employers sought when hiring. These skills were grouped into four categories: interpersonal, cognitive, self-leadership and digital. Within these groups notable skills included: critical thinking, teamwork effectiveness, emotional intelligence, grit and persistence, as well as a broad array of digital fluency. Businesses are finding gaps in such skills citing problems with determination, resilience, work ethic and focus on developing strong character (Bentley University, 2014). Acknowledgement of this disconnect is pertinent when analyzing curriculum and policy as it outlines the gaps and misconceptions between what truly connotes student readiness.

In its subjectivity, I find it necessary to share my own definition of student readiness which amounted to a compilation of my personal experiences as a student, my experience in teacher training programs, various research, and my personal accounts with others. Student readiness encompasses a broad dimension of necessary skills and qualities for life. When

referring to secondary student readiness, three sectors are commonly referred to: a) ideas of post-secondary education, b) the workforce and professional life as well as c) social responsibility in one's community and the broader global society. The concept of 21st century learning and student readiness intertwine in that they rhetorically influence each other. If 21st century learning is the process of preparing students for an ever-changing world, student readiness is the reflection of successful 21st century learning. Student readiness is the marker of achievement in 21st century learning and the product of the continuity of 21st century learning with existing as a citizen in the 21st century.

The framework that guides this research connects the components of the superstructure: the process of learning, the products of learning and the goal of learning. By acknowledging the goal of learning as preparing students for the future, we can explore the ideas that constitute 21st century learning and as such recount the perspectives of teaching to such and where teaching autonomy intertwines.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

In this chapter, I outline the methodology I chose to use in my study and the rationale behind it. This is followed with a section on data collection which includes a discussion on sampling and participant selection, data collection methods and interviewing techniques. The following section outlines data management choices including the transcription process and analysis techniques used. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a section on credibility of the research.

Methodology

The research is a qualitative inquiry and more specifically ethnography. Ethnography as a methodology was used to highlight personal stories, experiences, and memories to empower participants. Ethnographic traditions influenced my research design across the decisions I have made throughout the process. The intention of collecting data "from 'real life' situations which are as far as possible undistorted by the researcher" (Pole, 2003, p.6), is to explore the research questions from the perspective of the *insider*. The study used ethnographic traditions as a catalyst to provide first-hand accounts of the day-to-day realities of educators in relation to standardized examinations. I chose to conduct an ethnographic study with both teacher and administrator participants to get an in-depth view into the realities of standardized provincial exams implementation inside school environments.

While large-scale generalizable data would likely be more easily digestible by policy makers, education is a diverse social interaction and must be treated as so. LeCompte (2002) explains that ethnography aims to "embed individuals within a cultural framework without losing their unique and separate qualities or reducing them to a collection of abstract traits" (p.292).

Educator voices should be kept as such, as individual accounts in relation to the various case-specific characteristics that make for a unique perspective. A reciprocal relationship with participants is key in allowing "participants to author their own understanding of the world" (Harrison, 2018, p.73). Ethnography allowed me to spend extended time with my participants, openly exploring and recounting past experiences while actively exploring the realities of the fast-changing school climate amongst a now two-year pandemic.

Data Collection

Participants and Selection

The target population for this study was both secondary administrators and teachers with experience administering provincial Ministry exams in any subject in Secondary Four and Five levels in the greater Montréal region of Québec. The choice to conduct research with English language school boards transpired from an understanding of the choice language requirements of holding an ethnographic semi-structured interview. Due to the nature of such, working within English language school boards and private schools allowed me to conduct my interviews in a language I am most comfortable with. This choice does open itself to the possibility that the experiences and perspectives of those working in the French language sectors may differ. Further exploration into this possibility would require deeper investigation in a future study.

I began participant recruitment by contacting six English public-school boards and private schools in the greater Montréal area. After school board approval, I chose to contact all schools in each board. This allowed for a greater chance to reach as many potential participants within my target population. With individual school approval, school administrators then relayed the recruitment documents to their staff with directions to express interest to me directly.

Teacher and administrator participants were presented with a consent form which outlined the details of the study and participant rights in layman's terms. Participants were finally chosen on a voluntary basis after the recruitment and approval process.

The study included 7 participants (4 administrators and 3 teachers) who met the participant criteria reflecting a purposeful criterion sampling strategy as outlined by Patton (2002) that included:

- Being a secondary teacher or administrator at an English or Bilingual school in the greater Montréal region of Québec

- Had experience administering Secondary 4 or 5 provincial standardized exams in their career

The choice to interview both teachers and administrators was taken to gain a richer understanding of experience implementing provincial standardized exams. Since curriculum implementation assumes a top-down approach, it is important to follow the stages of implementation as it flows down the educational system. Teachers and administrators represent the vessels of curriculum implementation to students and in turn, experience the process of doing so. These actors serve as a team to ensure student success as they progress through their educational careers. The purposeful selection of teacher and administrator participants represented the group of stakeholders who could best reflect on the realities of the complex dynamics between implementing curriculum requirements and assessment practices simultaneously. These participants would also be able to reflect on the cancellation of standardized exams in the 2020-2021 school year from the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2

Participant Pseudonyms, Roles, and School Setting

Pseudonym	Role	Setting
Stephen	Curriculum Director	Private School
Claudia	Secondary 3 & 4 Science, Technology and Chemistry Teacher Science Department Head	Public School
Margot	Secondary 3 & 4 Administrator	Private School
Elyse	Secondary 3 & 4 History teacher (taught in French) Previously School Board Consultant	Public School
Anna	Principal	Public School
Linda	Secondary 2, 3, 4 Math and Science Teacher Previously on Exam Writing & Evaluation Teams	Public School
Natalie	Secondary 5 Administrator	Private School

Interviewing

Data collection for this study was conducted through semi-structured interviews. Since the aim of the study was to gain a rich understanding of the perspectives and experiences of secondary educators, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility and deep investigation into important events while continuing to remain consistent with the nature of the research questions. Due to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted virtually through the WebEx application to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all involved. An ethnographic approach to interviewing was taken to facilitate conversations that inhibited the participants to share openly both their experiences and ideas around the research questions. According to O'Reilly (2012), an ethnographic interview takes place in a "comfortable setting" and allows the researcher and participant to engage in "meaningful conversation…freely and undisturbed" (p.147). Practicing ethnography through interviewing requires in-depth listening from the interviewer, growing collaboration with the participant to

"inform our reflexive approach" in accordance with practicing ethnography (Pink, 2009, as cited in O'Reilly, 2012, p.151).

The approach to questioning involved following a similar "conversational guide" as outlined by Rubin and Rubin (1995) comprised of *main questions* and *probes* which enable each of the main questions to be explored in depth accompanied by *follow up questions* that take the conversation into further depth (as cited in O'Reilly, 2012, p.149). This allowed for a sense of structure for the conversations but allowed for flexibility from both the participants and principal investigator to explore ideas past the immediate scope of the questions.

Data collection for this study was sourced from voice recorded virtual interviews as well as curriculum document examination. Participants were each interviewed twice. The first round of interviews was conducted beginning in October 2021 and the second round of interviews were conducted beginning in December 2021. Participants were given the opportunity to choose the date and times of interviews as it best suited their availability. Interviews took place virtually in quiet spaces to ensure privacy and limit distractions throughout the process. Each interview took approximately 30-45 minutes. The participants were asked 8-9 open-ended key questions along with probing questions concerning Ministry exam preparation, teaching philosophy and teaching autonomy (see Appendix B). The second round of virtual interviews was conducted with each participant with questions that were determined by participant responses in the first round of interviews. This allowed for an initial analysis of the interview data to gain a deeper understanding of the previous conversation, allowing for personalization to each participant as needed. The virtual interviews were audio recorded for transcription, analysis, and coding for the purpose of this research. This was done to ensure accurate representation of the conversations.

Data Management

Storage of Data (Identifiable & Non-identifiable data)

Upon completion of interviews, participants were given the choice to choose a

pseudonym to be represented by and were otherwise assigned one. All identifiable data (consent

forms and original interview recordings) were then stored in password protected files on an

encrypted external hard drive to ensure two levels of protection. Any written transcripts

generated from audio recorded dialogues and analysis were stored on a password-protected

OneDrive cloud account on the principal investigator's password-protected laptop. For the

remainder of the data analysis process, participants were referred to by their pseudonyms only.

All identifiable data will be stored on an encrypted external hard drive in the principal

investigator's home for seven years following the conclusion of the research. After seven years,

all data will be securely destroyed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations remained at the forefront of my research as it is my responsibility,

as the researcher, to protect the interests of my participants and ensure adequate confidentiality is

upheld. Prior to the study, I obtained the Tri-council Ethics certificate as well as approval from

the Research Ethics Board at McGill University. Approval was also obtained by individual

school boards as well as school administrators before participant recruitment began. Consent

forms (Appendix A) for all participants clearly outlined intent of the study, participant rights and

expectations, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason.

Signed consent forms were collected from all participants prior to data collection and participant

rights were reiterated again verbally before commencement of interviews. The study ultimately remained voluntary, protecting the rights of the participants throughout.

My interest and training in education was my sole connection to my participants. At the time of the study, I had no existing relationship with the participants recruited. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic in the context of participant employment, confidentiality was ensured with the use of pseudonyms and removal of all identifiable information such as school board affiliations and school names. Due to the requirements of recruitment from the school boards, recruitment documents for eligible teachers were typically sent by email from school administrators. Consequently, I prompted participants to express their interest in the study to myself directly to allow participant confidentiality from other co-workers at their place of work. Although all precautions were taken, third-party interception through online communications remained a perceived risk due to the nature of virtual interviews and software use. I indicated that participants could decline to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering and could keep their video turned off as only voice recordings were being used for the interviews. Participants were notified when the voice recording began in the interviews. In the case of any emotional stress experienced during the interview process, I remained equipped with the information to direct them to support resources offered through their applicable employee health plan.

Data Analysis

Transcription

The transcription and analysis process happened simultaneously throughout this study allowing for continuous reflection. Teacher and administrator interview protocols were drafted

for the first round of interviews. A verbatim approach to transcription was taken apart from false

starts and repeated words. This was done to capture the essence of the conversation while

keeping clarity as English was the second language for some of the participants. In the first

interview, all teacher and administrator participants were asked the same set of questions. After

the first round of interviews, I began transcribing and made note of recurring ideas and

keywords. Transcripts were then analyzed in relation to the interview questions and to the

research study questions. Individual transcripts were analyzed to note any points that I wished to

clarify or to dive into deeper. The second-round interview protocols were more individualized to

account for the individual responses from each participant while also containing a few questions

that were posed to all participants.

Analysis

       After the second round of interviews, recordings were again transcribed and analyzed.

The initial analysis of these interviews was conducted in a similar manner by identifying relevant

ideas, keywords, and cross-analysis in relation to interview and research questions. Any relevant

findings were noted at this time. The second phase of analysis was done so through an inductive

thematic approach where codes were first written keeping as close to participant responses as

they related to the interview questions. Codes were then revised through a secondary reading

where categories were created for codes according to ideas that were reoccurring throughout the

data.   The third phase of analysis allowed for the initial categories to be re-read as they

informed the research questions which fostered the crafting of themes that will be discussed

further in the following chapter. The final analysis phase allowed for a deductive study of the

data through the designated themes to ensure a rigorous and immersive analysis of the participant interview data.

Credibility and Reflexivity

Credibility is the foundation of ethnographic research. To ensure credibility of this study, accurate depiction of participants' perception of their reality while portraying a detailed picture of their experiences remained a priority. Interview questions were designed to assume a value-neutral stance to allow for validity in participant responses. The interview transcripts were shared with participants to ensure the authenticity of their responses was captured. This reduced bias and assumptions from the researcher that could ultimately affect the credibility of the study.

While my experience with the implementation of standardized exams stems from research and informal conversations with those in the field, I cannot attest to personal experiences of being a stakeholder in the administration of doing so. I recognize my positionality as an educational researcher and teacher by credentials as the foundation for my understanding and stance on the subject matter. While positioning myself in the research, I realize that many administrator participants would have completed graduate requirements with likeness to the program I am currently doing research for. This may be a point of connection with these participants as we have similar educational backgrounds but as I currently do not have extensive teaching experience, I do not believe I hold any unusual power over these participants. Where positionality becomes important is with regards to teacher participants as I have a similar educational background to their superiors. To minimize any power imbalance, I assume a position within my lack of teaching experience, that I seek to learn from those experts who are experiencing the realities of administering curriculum. Although my research and educational

background outline my interest in education reform, my lack of time in the field that I am

studying emphasizes the need to learn from key informants.

In a genuine journey to understand the implications of provincial exams, I ensured to

remove my bias to the best of my abilities when writing the interview questions and while

interacting with participants. As Harrison (2018) coined as "writing the ethnographer ", I believe

my experiences, questions, problems, insights all have a place in the final product. While

confidentiality is ensured, the aim of the study was to humanize my participants through their

stories even if I cannot specifically 'name' them. Though the timeline for this project is short, the

data was continuously revisited throughout the entirety of the study and themes were adapted

accordingly.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the methodology used in this study. I began by outlining the

rationale for selecting ethnography to support my research. I defined how data was collected

through the processes of participant recruitment and interviewing. I described the procedures of

managing and storing data as well as the undertaking of data analysis. I supported my

methodology through the practice of reflexivity and the measures I took to increase credibility

including ethical considerations. In this chapter, I speak to the data analysis approach which led

to the creation of themes. I will continue to expand on these themes as I recount the analysis that

ensued through interviewing in the following chapters.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

Presented in this chapter are the five themes that developed through the participant interview data. Encompassed in each theme are the subcategories that support the overarching theme. The data are used to support the development of the themes. The five themes that were established through refining the data consist of: 1) Explicit Exam-Influenced Learning, notably the responses outlining specific dynamics of exam preparation; 2) Time Starved Schools, comprised of the perspectives and experiences related to instructional time constraints enhanced by the exam; 3) Accountability as Professional Responsibility and Pressure, drawing on accountability practices associated with the exam 4) Conflicting Philosophies of Learning, drawing on educators' professional philosophies in relation to those facilitated by the exam; and 5) Ideas of Student Readiness, highlighting the skills and knowledge to best equip students moving forward.

Coding and Analysis

Keeping with ethnographic traditions, a thematic analysis approach was taken to analyze the data. Braun and Clarke (2021) define thematic analysis as "a method of qualitative analysis […] for exploring, interpreting, and reporting relevant patterns of meaning across a dataset" (p.223). The reflexive approach to thematic analysis as coined by Braun and Clarke (2021) allowed for working with the data in a way that promoted continuous questioning and consistency in keeping detailed accounts of my positionality in the research process. Reflexivity in thematic analysis brings rigor to the research often called into question in qualitative research approaches including ethnography.

To begin this process, interview recordings were first transcribed taking a verbatim approach by recording the participant responses word for word. Upon a second review of the transcriptions, false starts and repeated words were omitted to reduce redundancy and maximize flow. The analysis of the data began after the completion of the first round of interviews. At this point, interview transcripts were read over, and notes were made in the margins. Here I highlighted any responses that I wanted to prompt for further clarification or detail. I then formulated a table by research questions where participant responses were summarized and viewed as a whole. This process allowed for a pointed approach to the second interview phase where I was able to ask participant-specific questions surrounding clarification of previous responses and afforded me the ability to probe further on any responses that I felt required more detail. The second interview also included a set of questions that emerged from the first interview process that were asked to all participants. Following the second round of interviews, transcribing ensued using the same techniques and then all interviews were read over while making notes of participant responses and potentially relevant codes. This process was done to familiarize myself with the data as a whole and was done by hand on physical copies of the transcripts.

The first formal round of analysis was done using the coding software NVivo. Transcripts were uploaded into the software and were read over individually creating 115 initial codes for any relevant ideas while keeping the codes as close as possible to the participant responses. The initial codes were combined in instances where the specific terminology used in interviews differed slightly which left me with 63 codes. This coding required a few revisions as I continued to ensure that I was not pre-emptively creating themes in the data. After completion of the first round of analysis, I revised my codes through categorizing and merging connected codes. Codes

were categorized as they applied to the eight categories of: a) COVID realities, b) Exam Itself, c) Exam Preparation, d) General Learning, e) Instruction, f) Student Readiness, g) Student Social/Emotional, h) Teaching Profession. These categories allowed for a visualization of the data that separated for example, characteristics of the exam itself (i.e., multiple choice questions) from the process of preparation for Ministry exams (i.e., practice tests). Additionally, it allowed for separation of ideas of classroom teaching from other professional responsibilities and pressures (i.e., school ranking).

At this point the categories were further analyzed and in doing so I made the decision that codes under 'COVID realities' should be included in relation to what they influenced. Through analysis it was evident that the pandemic could not be spoken to as a separate measure due to the various hardships surrounding this time. I instead chose to view the codes in this category as being able to shed perspective on the other established categories. For example, teaching opportunities that resulted from the cancellation of exams were viewed in relation to instruction. Similarly, the emotional responses of students as noted by participants would be re-categorized according to the ideas that they could provide perspective on (i.e., student stress surrounding success on the exam and its influence on graduation were merged with the 'Exam Itself' category).

The analysis process allowed for continuous revision of categorization of codes to ensure themes represented the essence of the participants perspectives. Analysis continued informally throughout the writing process as sub-themes were reorganized to reflect the narrative nature of writing up the findings. Here I was able to experiment with positioning of the findings within the chapter to allow for re-reading of the data in a way that supports the progression of concepts. For example, explanation of preparation methods was crucial to discuss prior to the time constraints

of doing so. Additionally, discussions of pressure from the exams connected the necessity for exam preparation prior to considering conflicts with learning philosophies. Throughout this process it was evident that the themes intertwined with one another and were often spoken to in relation to each other. It outlined the interconnectedness of the research questions that situate my study and that viewing them as such forms a more well-rounded view on the circumstances.

Figure 2

Data Analysis-Theme Breakdown
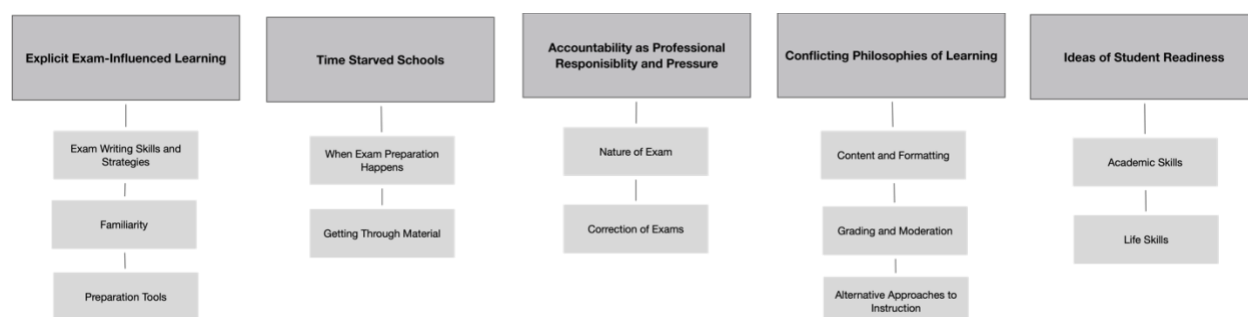
Theme 1: Explicit Exam-Influenced Learning

This theme explores the practices involved in Ministry exam preparation as outlined by participants. All participants expressed the need for explicit preparation methods, planning and/or tools that were felt to be necessary for student success on the Ministry examinations. The following subthemes break down the identified skills and strategies identified as necessary for exam writing, the importance of student familiarity with exam structure and questioning, and the preparation tools utilized. Participants suggested that the preparation of students for Ministry exams required teaching skills for high-stakes exams, enacting the use of preparation materials and practice but also creating ample opportunities to familiarize students with what was being asked of them on the exams. These subcategories comprise explicit exam-influenced learning as

they are specific to high-stakes testing and the characteristics of the Québec Ministry exams.

While some of these skills, tools and learnings are taught for other in-class assessment, the

exigency of such learning is stipulated by the Ministry exam. The rigorous approach to exam

preparation was perceived by participants as necessary to avoid students feeling mislead or

unprepared to answer questions.

Exam Writing Skills and Strategies

Participants emphasized the necessity to teach in a way that allowed students to gain the

skills and knowledge to find success on the exams. This translates into crafting lessons to

introduce students to which aspects of content will be presented, the formatting of exam

questions and the expectations for student responses. In the excerpt below, participants discuss

the skills, tools, and practice opportunities they provide for their students that are outside of their

curriculum but necessary for exam preparation.

> *When they are needing to prepare students for Ministry exams […] they also want to*
>
> *make sure that students understand the format of the exam taking: what to expect in an*
>
> *exam setting, how questions will be presented, how students might be expected to answer*
>
> *in a particular way, or use particular kinds of direct language so that it's really clear to*
>
> *the teacher who's correcting the exam that the student has exactly what they need.*
>
> *(Stephen, First Interview, Lines 39-44)*

Another participant, Elyse, explained that throughout every class she reviews a type of question

that students may come across on the exam. While the content of the practice questions may be

new to the students, she places focus on having the students understand the purpose of what the

question is asking. Additionally, participants spoke to teaching students how to break down

questions, highlight key words, and cross out incorrect multiple-choice answers. Claudia explained that students have an understanding that there is a specific response or approach to answering expected throughout the Ministry exams. Similarly, the level of literacy skills and reading comprehension skills was noted as critical in all subjects as outlined by the following participant:

> *Because so much, especially with the math, the math questions, I feel like the level of literacy that is needed, just to figure out what the question is asking you, is really something that is very daunting […] and I, I hear from the kids very often, them go, "Oh, is that all that it's asking?" (Linda, First Interview, Lines 252-261)*

The importance of exam writing skills and strategies was spoken to continuously by participants as the wording of exam questions and expectations for answers were common places for student error. Participants acknowledged that the Ministry exam questions are worded in a way which requires specific responses and that rigid marking schemes left little room for error. For students to express their mastery in a competency, students must be equipped with strategies to break down questions to answer in a way that would be deemed in line with Ministry grading requirements. Participants acknowledged the high level of literacy skills needed to decode Ministry exam questions before beginning to impart the knowledge related to the content.

Familiarity

The need to familiarize students with the structure and expectations specifically within the Ministry exams was typically coupled with the necessity of teach exam writing skills and strategies. Participants relayed the necessity in teaching these skills for student success specifically on the exams due to the nature of the exam format and expectations for responses.

Beyond teaching these skills, participants spoke to needing to create opportunities for student to

engage in experiences that mimicked the nature of high-stakes exams. The Ministry exams like

all high-stakes testing have rigid rules and administration requirements to ensure the ethics of the

assessment. These requirements comprise of time limits, academic honesty, allowable materials

in the exam space and the utilization of government prepared exam packages. While it is likely

students will continue to see high-stakes assessment after high school, the responsibility to

familiarize students with these requirements typically lies in the hands of secondary educators.

Stephen explained that the scenario of having to write the exam in the school gym rather than the

classroom was a new experience for students that required familiarization. As there are many

new experiences coupled with pressure and stress associated with the Ministry exams, teachers

feel the responsibility to do everything in their power to avoid additional stress caused by change

to their status quo. Another participant spoke to the criticality of time management skills when

writing a large exam and how to handle moving through the exam when you are unsure of an

answer:

> *And also a lot of gestion des temps, so time management. When it's like an exam that it's*
>
> *required two hours, so how to prepare, what do you do in the first 15 minutes. If you*
>
> *panic, then don't panic just go to another question, and then you can come back. So all*
>
> *the little tips like that. (Margot, Second Interview, Lines 39-42)*

Many participants spoke to the cancellation of Ministry exams in the 2020-2021 year as creating

stress and pressure regarding familiarizing students with high-stakes testing as the pandemic has

left some Secondary Four and Five students with minimal experience writing exams.

Additionally, some students will have not experienced exams since their first year in high school

and participants conveyed Secondary One in-school exams do not prepare students for the

magnitude of later-year exams. Elyse addressed that much of the exam stress came from the fear of the unknown. The stress students feel is coupled with the uncertainty of what to expect from the exams; that no amount of studying will be adequate until they have first-hand experience.

Familiarizing students with high-stakes exam situations was considered crucial for student success in Ministry exams. Secondary students are continuously developing their social emotional skills and learning to deal with stressful situations. Educators feel the responsibility to provide students with opportunities to experience these types of rigid assessments to stress and anxiety. These exercises are necessary as part of exam preparation as student psychological and emotional response to test anxiety can hinder their ability to exemplify their learnings. The presence of such exam-induced emotional responses is in-line with the literature and participants within the study acknowledged the approaches taken to help mitigate such responses.

Preparation Tools

To facilitate exam preparation opportunities and assess students' abilities prior to encountering Ministry exams, participants undertook the use of a variety of preparation tools and materials. Preparation tools were typically reported in the form of practice tests, mid-term exams, and working through exam-like questions in class. These types of assessments were being used by the schools to get an initial overview of student achievement on similar assessments while there was still time for school intervention. Participants also spoke about in-school and online tutoring, preparation guides as well as continuous communication in school and with parents about the Ministry exam period. Most participants acknowledged the use of mid-year exams either prepared by the individual schools or school boards as a means of providing students with a chance to experience exam situations before it is heavily weighted towards their final mark.

Alongside these assessments participants described preparation periods for mid-year exam time ultimately culminating an extended Ministry exam preparation. The following excerpt outlines the preparation tools utilized in their school:

> *We do practice ones [questions], and then they have a practice test. And then we do the video section on our midterms. And then we will revisit it again in May. Then we do three more practice ones, and they do a practice test. And then they do it on the midterm. So, they're ready. (Claudia, First Interview, Lines 46-49)*

There was a commonality between all participants that practice exams and tests designed in-school or by school boards were formatted to 'mirror' the content and formatting that would be expected on the Ministry exams. This process, for the sake of this study, will be referred to as *exam mirroring* which was present in class assignments, tests, school, and board-wide exams. The idea that students require continuous exposure to the specific qualities of the Ministry exams is emulated by exam mirroring and in turn showcases the impact the Ministry exams have on other assessment practices. Claudia explained that the math questions students encounter within their in-class assignments and tests are written in the same format as the Ministry exam questions. She discussed the procedures for answering exam questions including the necessity for including formulas, units of measurement and showing their work was mirrored as a requirement for in-class activities. Additionally, one participant explained that she moved to use exam mirroring in all her in-class tests:

> *I also threw out all… all of my own personally, developed tests have also been derived from either old exam questions or modifications of old exam questions or created to sort of mirror the sorts of things. (Linda, First Interview, Lines 46-48)*

The use of preparation tools was noted as a key component in exam preparation as both a means of familiarizing students with exam formatting but also to assess students' abilities in exam like situations. Participants acknowledge the crucial nature of doing so while still having time for intervention before the Ministry exams.

The findings outlined in this theme point to a feeling of necessity toward rigorous exam preparation. The magnitude of preparation that is perceived as required for the Ministry exams outlines the extensive instructional time that is spent on such. While preparation for an exam is a fruitful exercise, the data relays that the impact of spending excessive amounts of time on specific exam preparation takes time away from typical teaching time and questions the goal of the curriculum. This theme highlights the ways in which exam preparation is wedged into all aspects of assessment and classroom instruction and that exam preparation stretches well throughout the year especially in schools with mid-year exams. The magnitude of exam preparation routines perpetuates the worry that educators' day-to-day teaching methods could translate into student shortcomings on exams. The second theme outlines the characteristics of the exam that brings further clarity to this idea.

Theme 2: Time Starved Schools

All participants interviewed expressed frustration regarding time constraints exacerbated by the exam preparation process. The time and dedication allocated to the Ministry exams ultimately take away from other learning opportunities. The need for rigorous exam preparation places more pressure on educators to ensure they can cover the curriculum. This is the subject of theme two. This theme comprises of two subthemes of when exam prep happens and getting

through material. Together they explore the time allotted to exam preparation and the endeavor of getting though material as expressed by participants.

When Exam Preparation Happens

While all participants recounted specific exam preparation time in their schools, approaches to exam preparation differed. All participants recounted a level of year-round preparation. Specifically, when it came to subject-specific content knowledge necessary for the exam, educators spoke to the consciousness of needing year-long preparation. Stephen explained that content preparation for Grade 10 Math, Science and History courses happened all-year and that teachers were continuously mindful of the exam preparation. The idea was echoed in conversations with Elyse when she noted her class works on examined history content every class and that roughly 70% of the year is spent on exam preparation to ensure students had the "tools in their toolbelt" to succeed on the exam.

Most participants described review periods closer to the exam date and some noted that similar periods were held around mid-year school exams in those that held them. Natalie outlined that constant information being relayed to teachers and that exam preparation was year-long but as the exam date approaches teachers begin doing reviews. Additionally, participants spoke to the exam preparation in relation to the mid-year exams which can then be used to assess the areas students need assistance:

> *Especially in Secondary Four. Whereas in Secondary Five, because they're language based, I would say they spend, you know, a focused time around November/December, because we do have December exams in our school as well. And so, students are preparing for those exams and those exams are meant to, you know, give the student*

practice in exam taking, but also important information to the teachers about maybe what

they need to focus on with students before they're in the more high-stakes exam in May or

June. So there's a focused attention around it in November and December as well. But

yes, throughout the year, they're spending time on that preparation. (Stephen, First

Interview, Lines 72-79)

Exam preparation is exemplified as a year-long venture and while most participants noted specific review periods closer to the exam dates, there is consistent attention paid to ensuring students are constantly engaging in activities that will equip them for exam success. Schools that administer mid-year exams also participate in early year exam preparation through mid-year exam review periods, the mid-year exams themselves as well as ample opportunities closer to the Ministry exams period. As previously mentioned, many participants acknowledged mirroring their in-class assessment tools to familiarize and prepare students for similar question structures as seen on the Ministry exams.

Getting Through Material

Getting through course material was expressed by both administrators and teachers as being a stressful endeavor. This stress is inevitable for those responsible for exam-assessed courses where timing and planning is of utmost importance to corroborate student success on the summative Ministry exam. The ramifications of not getting through all the outlined content could greatly impact student achievement. Natalie spoke to the feedback she receives from teaching staff that they are struggling to get through course material and ensure students are ready for the exam. In a typical year, teachers express frustration with the numerous unexpected disruptions to instructional time. Conversations with Elyse highlighted that when looking ahead they start to

feel the stress of the amount of content needed to be covered when notification of assemblies and holidays are considered.

Additionally, teachers spoke to the planning of instructional time and the frustration that ensues when you simply do not have enough classes to cover the content. Claudia explained that planning involves making decisions of what topics or activities can be condensed or omitted to cover all the topics within the curriculum:

> *It's the number of hours dedicated to science, right? So if you take all the POLs, and the time that you need to teach everything, let's say you need 52 classes, but you only have 48, what are you going to combine to make sure that you have… and then you also have the like, right, make sure that you know you have enough spares that you lose because of assemblies or here or there. So you can't really use the full time. So it's all about planning and what can you avoid? And what can you string together and put together to be able to… cover all topics. (Claudia, First Interview, Lines 122-127)*

With regards to planning, Linda noted that depending on the class group, come May, she will find herself asking colleagues to spare her their class time or alternatively will be holding classes on lunch hours to ensure they get through all the content needed.

When asked if they felt the cancellation of exams in the 2020-2021 school year changed this feeling, participants expressed a relief that they could slow down the instructional pace and alleviate the need to rush through material. They expressed this was particularly necessary due to school closures adding to an already constricted timeline. Claudia exemplified this sentiment when she explained, "I was very happy that we didn't have a Ministry exam, because there was no way in the world, we would be able to cover all the content the way that our school had set it up" (Claudia, First Interview, Lines 163-165). Educators saw the return of the race to get through

the material in the 2021-2022 school year with the reinstated Ministry exams. Natalie also spoke

to this when she explained that although the priority of the 2021-2022 school year was to follow

the essential learnings outlined by the government, teachers are still relaying to administration

that they do not have enough time.

     Participants spoke to the reduction in exam weight on the student's final grade to 20% as

making a considerable impact in lessening the pressure for both teachers and students. This was

agreed to be especially necessary due to the missed learning time the previous year and the

obligation to catch students up. The below exert explains the continued feeling of falling behind

which was inevitable due to catching students up:

> *Until then we were rushing, rushing, rushing and it's like, "oh my god!" And if you look*
>
> *at the.. I know the math teachers are saying they are two weeks behind, three weeks*
>
> *behind because kids from previous years are so behind because of COVID that they're*
>
> *trying to rush but you can't, because if you fall behind it's like the snowball effect. (Elyse,*
>
> *First Interview, Lines 268-272)*

The constraint of time was highlighted as an already exhaustive factor in schools as

numerous interruptions further reduce allocated instructional time. The high stakes nature of the

exam escalates the pressure to ensure all content is covered in a comprehensive way. With the

success of students rooted in the planning and delivery of exam-tested material, the professional

responsibility to prioritize such material remains increasingly high. The following theme speaks

to the weight of this professional responsibility when classed as accountability practices.

Theme 3: Accountability as Professional Responsibility and Pressure

From a professional standpoint, teachers feel tied to their students' success. Educators consider their students' best interests as a top responsibility and in doing so must act in a way that best serves those interests. Professionalization of any field requires a level of accountability practices to be put in place to uphold the professional standards outlined in the field. This theme details the professional responsibility tied to student success on the exams and the challenges that come with accountability practices as sustained within the exam process. Such responsibility was felt namely due to the high-stakes nature of the exam and the correction process of the exam.

Nature of Exam

Conversations surrounding the nature of the Ministry exams included discussions of the high-stakes nature, highlighting the positive correlation between the weighting of the exams and the conceptualization of the high-stakes impact. Participants spoke to the pressure felt by both educators and students due to high stakes associated with having an exam valued at 50% of the student's final grade. The academic grade levels in which students wrote Ministry exams also increased the perception of the Ministry exams being high stakes. As students write these exams in the final two years of high school, there is a common pressure regarding the impact of a 50% exam on students' final course grades and achievement of the secondary school diploma.

Concerns of the high-stake nature, reflection of the results on the school's reputation, and the weighting of the exam on the student's grade were highlighted in conversation with the following participant who shared the feeling of responsibility to ensure student success, in fear of the consequences of the absence of such.

Because it's… that exam it's the all, to end all. Right? And that's the grade that appears in the newspapers, for the ranking. That's what appears on, like you know when parents are looking for… shopping for schools in the English system. […], like, oh, this one is ranked higher than this one. Well, it's all about the numbers, right? So like it or not, we have to teach towards the exam. And until the government removes that June exam, we're always gonna teach for that exam, because it's necessary to graduate high school and those numbers do come out, and you are accountable, right? (Elyse, Second Interview, Lines 198-204)

Accountability practices remain a foundational characteristic of both professionalization and standardized assessment. Participants expressed agreement with professional accountability in education but recognized the high stakes nature of the exam to bring additional pressure to the profession. Natalie explained that she perceived Ministry exams held teachers responsible for the curriculum, "They're good ways of the teachers too being responsible, being accountable for the content that they have to teach" (Natalie, First Interview, Lines 167-168). Within the idea of accountability, Anna shared her perspective on Ministry exams as a data collection tool, "I think a standardized kind of exam kind of brings data to the team of teachers that is important in order to get them ready for post-secondary education" (Anna, Second Interview, Lines 96-98).

Within the scope of accountability, both administrator and teacher participants explain that they personally feel the weight of accountability both from the high-stakes nature of exams and the intrinsic desire for their students to find success. In looking at the secondary effects of Ministry exam accountability, we can bring light to some potentially unintended implications on the educational field and perceived career satisfaction. Conversations with Elyse highlighted the personal pressure she feels surrounding Ministry exams where she struggles with wanting to

improve professionally, but also questions her abilities as a teacher in the times where her

students did not find the level of success as was anticipated. Elyse explains that as a teacher of a

Ministry exam assessed course, her students depend on her to graduate. She must push them as

close as possible to the graduation mark which causes her to put pressure on herself. She outlined

that the professional pressure is present through conversations with administration, "So at the

end of the year, my principal will go like, how come 20% of your kids failed, I have to be able to

justify why they failed" (Elyse, Second Interview, Lines 204-205). Elyse recounted that the

accountability relayed by the exams allows her a chance for reflection stating that if the

commonality of error can be traced back to her, she can review her teaching and revise for the

following cohort.

Another participant explained that the weight Ministry exams hold as a measure of

assessment gives way to criticism of teachers and their abilities if there are discrepancies

between teacher assessed course grades and exam marks:

And then their exam mark is significantly below that, we're told that we're marking too

easily, right? We are told that we obviously are giving marks away, because the mark on

the exam is taken as the ultimate measure of the year's learning. (Linda, First Interview,

Lines 432-425)

The topic of exam ambiguity was also commonly discussed where participants recounted

the uncertainty around what can be expected on the exam and years that the Ministry exams were

deemed particularly difficult. Anna spoke to the sentiment she feels as an administrator who sees

the impact of accountability on teachers, specifically in years when the exams have proved to be

more difficult than most. She explained that if the exams are deemed too difficult that the effects

are felt on everyone and specifically the teacher who feels like a failure because their students

did not do well. She went on to explain the relationship between students and their teacher is affected when students are not successful on the exam. In which case, students begin to question their teacher while developing a sense of distrust in their teacher's ability to help them find success:

> *Then it creates some kind of a doubt in the mind of the student that they can really do this. And then it creates a relationship with the students and the teacher that, "Ah well, you didn't teach me well. (Anna, First Interview, Lines 193-195)*

Participants describe the ambiguity of the curriculum and exam requirements as fostering a feeling of uncertainty towards what will be asked of students on the exam. Teacher participants felt a need to over prepare students in fear that by not doing so would have detrimental effects on their performance.

> *However, again, depending on the subject, sometimes those curricular requirements are so dense that the teacher is not really in a position to be 100% sure what aspect of what they know they need to prepare students for … what is going to be reflected on the exam. So I think, given that our teachers are trying to best prepare students for those, they feel that they have to over prepare them because they don't know exactly how it's going to be presented in the exam or what the particular focus will be. (Stephen, First Interview, Lines 151-157)*

Elyse again explained that the onus falls on the teacher if they do not cover a topic or skill that is assessed resulting in students losing marks, "But if I didn't cover it, it's all on me. It's not on them" (Elyse, Second Interview, Lines 134-135).

The cancellation of Ministry exams did provide more confidence to both students and teachers in this area when the assessment was left within the school's responsibility. Stephen

explained that during this time the confidence that teachers felt in relation to what would be assessed, allowed them to emulate such confidence to students. Stephen clarified that the material on exams would not be the same as what was covered in class but that the confidence was instilled through students recognizing key words or question structures they had seen throughout the year. He highlighted that both teachers and students can often feel like the exams will take them by surprise or contain something they had not anticipated which adds additional anxiety to exam time. This conversation was also a catalyst for the idea of professional autonomy in relation to the exams. As Stephen mentioned above, allowing teachers the autonomy to create the final exams brought confidence in both teachers and students that is otherwise not present. Darling-Hammond (2014) suggest alternative assessments such as performance assessments can be crucial tools for classroom teachers:

> They give teachers timely, formative information they need to help students improve—something that standardized examinations with long lapses between administration and results cannot do. And they help teachers become more knowledgeable about the standards and how to teach to them, as well as about their own students and how they learn. The process of using these assessments improves their teaching and their students' learning. The processes of collective scoring and moderation that many nations or states use to ensure reliability in scoring also prove educative for teachers, who learn to calibrate their sense of the standards to common benchmarks. (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p.5)

When considering teaching autonomy and professionalization, the connection of instruction and assessment remains crucial in understanding the magnitude of the implication of standardized testing on both the confidence of teachers and opportunity for professional growth.

The nature of high-stakes exams constitutes stress and anxiety to all those involved. The academic, emotional, and professional repercussions of being unsuccessful travels throughout schools. The weight that Ministry exams hold is a key factor in heightening the stressful response from educators and students where everyone has a stake in the game. The uncertainty of the exam content and layout account for a considerable amount of anxiety for those already feeling the pressure of high-stakes exams. This, in turn, forms an uncomfortable relationship between stakeholders when looking for a place to lay blame in times of lower exam performance.

Correction of Exams

The correction of exams is currently being done externally for most portions of the exams. Although some sections are marked by the classroom teachers, participants spoke to the feeling of distrust that is relayed to educators when responsibility for correction is outsourced.

> *Another positive aspect is that the teachers are allowed to correct portions of the exam, which I fully adhere to the pieces like this French mother tongue, that is the Ministry that corrects and that we don't get to see necessarily those corrections. Again, I'll bring that back to the negative, it basically shows that we don't have confidence in our teachers that are teaching the course. (Natalie, First Interview, Lines 163-167)*

The correction of exams including the marking guidelines were a shared area of concern for participants. Participants expressed the ambiguity with grading rubric language, the weight allocation of marks given to each question and the gap in transparency of corrections back to the school. Exam questions marked by the classroom teachers are done so with a provided rubric. Conversations with participants acknowledged the concerns about correction ethics and grading consistency of solely teacher graded exams. Natalie described a lack of "consistency and

harmonization on how to correct" and a mutual understanding of how to ensure doing so on

uniformed benchmarks (Natalie, First Interview, Lines 285-286). Participants recognized the

reasoning behind board-wide correction approaches where teachers would mark the exams of

students not associated with the school in which they worked. They also expressed the necessity

for teacher professional development in grading consistency to better equip educators with a

benchmark for grading practices. In the below excerpt, Anna explains a common fear in the

absence of standardization:

> *Because we have a tendency to want more for the student, I feel that without*
>
> *standardization, we would kind of develop our own idea of an 80%, for example, and*
>
> *then those kids would be like scoring 90s and all of a sudden, at 17 years old, we would*
>
> *send them to a university, and they would fail badly. (Anna, First Interview, Lines 178-*
>
> *181)*

Linda described the stress associated with marking with the provided rubrics when the

grading benchmarks use ambiguous language that make for undoubtedly subjective correcting

approaches. She explained that there is room for confusion when deciding what constitutes errors

referenced with terms like *some, a few,* or *several*. Additionally grading rubrics that refer to

meeting criteria using terms like *partially,* or *appropriately* leave the subjective decision up to

teachers who feel the weight of incorrectly assigning a benchmark as potentially having large

implications on a student mark.

The notion of exam correction was a common reoccurring theme where the outsourcing

of exam correction portrayed a lack of confidence in teachers to mark in a subjective manner.

Participants themselves said the lack of training in benchmarked assessment practices made it

difficult to trust their own judgement in fear of being reprimanded for marking too easily

compared to others. Coupled with the professional pressure and responsibility namely due to the

high-stakes nature of Ministry exams, the accountability practices as touted by standardized

assessment have deep ramifications on those administering the exams. In this case, participants

expressed feeling like their hands were tied due to the weight of their students' success and their

professional stature being so heavily intertwined with Ministry exams.

Theme 4: Conflicting Philosophies of Learning

When entering the field, pre-service teachers often spend a vast quantity of time

pondering their philosophical approach to teaching and learning. Through academic exploration,

years of experience and current research educators begin to develop their personal approach to

teaching and their philosophy of how students learn best. This theme explores the conflicting

philosophies of learning as they unfold around and through the administration of Ministry exams.

Participants spoke to the idea of student progression as a way of measuring learning, ideal

instructional and learning opportunities, as well as assessment approaches in relation to their

personal philosophies of learning. Participants spoke to these underpinnings as they conflict with

the learning outcomes portrayed by the Ministry exams.

Progression of Student Learning

The QEP is presented in a way that places emphasis on the progressions of learning that

students will follow throughout their secondary careers. It acknowledges the process of learning

that is developed each year off the learnings of the previous years. Participants identified the

progressive characteristics of learning as being key in understanding how students grow. The

below excerpt below embodies the sentiment felt by participants:

I think it's the way our teacher teaches and the way all year long, the focus has to be on

learning not on assessing or evaluating or testing. So just just the the principle of having

a Ministry exam at the end of the year in Sec 4, in Sec 5, is just emphasizing that it's

not… we have to look at the process of learning, we don't have to look at at the final…

finalité, you know, so I think it's completely opposite of our philosophy as educators.

(Margot, First Interview, Lines 242-245)

Another participant explained her approach to recognizing the process of learning in her classroom which placed focus on recognizing the continuous learning over time. She brought to light the necessity to motivate students to grow over the course of the year by allowing their improvements to be reflected in their course grade:

And I always tell my students, if you do better on this one, I'll just remove an old one.

Because before you didn't demonstrate to me that you mastered this content or this skill,

but now you have so why would I penalize you now for something that you weren't maybe

ready to do in September and the fact that coming to school learning how to become a

student again, socializing and you've grown as long as you show me that you you've

mastered it, why would I penalize you before? (Elyse, Second Interview, Lines 337-342)

The nature of the Ministry exams as a summative approach to assessment fostered a common dialogue where participants described the exam to be *a snapshot in time.* These perspectives remain consistent with the critique considered in the literature. Regarding this idea, Natalie explained that "Ministry exams, for me, are just a quick snapshot in time and if that kid is having a really bad day, is not feeling well, it's not a true representation of what he or she can, is able to do or their competency level" (Natalie, Second Interview, Lines 125-126). This idea was echoed by participants as being detrimental to student learning. Additionally, the QEP is placing

high importance on the progressive quality of student learning in that teachers should be planning their instructional time according to the progression laid out in the curriculum documents. While this is aligned with most participants' philosophical underpinnings, they do not feel the Ministry exams serve as an assessment approach that aligns itself with the Progressions of Learning.

Content and Formatting

Conversations of content and formatting arose through the interview process. Ministry exams were often critiqued surrounding the content and formatting choices in relation to participant philosophies of learning. Participants spoke to the importance of the transfer of knowledge when learning and that students feel more connected with their studies when they can see the relationship to other situations in their lives. Stephen explained that teachers in his school place importance on facilitating deep learning opportunities through the creation of learning environments that foster student understanding of the transfer of knowledge to real life situations (Stephen, Administrator). Additionally, he spoke to the attitude that the transfer of knowledge is not always apparent on the Ministry Exams:

> *So, I would say that the teaching philosophy at the school is that students learn best when they understand the application of what they're learning. And we know that if you really understand then you can apply it in a scenario that might happen authentically in real life, or potentially, in an exam taking scenario. What's different about exam taking, though, is that it's not always clear how what you've learned, needs to be applied to a particular situation. (Stephen, First Interview, Lines 85-89)*

Language in terms of the student's mother tongue, as well as repertoire of background knowledge were described by participants as factors in which students are disadvantaged by the exam. Participants expressed that French as second language students and more so newly immigrated students who do not hold a strong mastery of the French language, are unable to demonstrate their knowledge in the language or content when unfamiliar topics are used to assess their French language skills. Natalie recounted an experience with Ministry exams where the topic of artificial intelligence was used in a question to assess students. She explains that the topic and language was unfamiliar, and it was quite difficult for students to not only write in their second language but to also do so with an unfamiliar topic. This sentiment was echoed throughout all participants that the consideration of prior student knowledge is not always upheld. Furthermore, participants drew attention to the correction grids for the French Ministry exams as being unforgiving to second-language learning students as outlined in the excerpt below:

> *I understand that we expect the French students that come from a French school to be able to do it. But when we have a good majority of Anglophones writing this exam, even Allophones, and the correction grid is basically if you do more than fourteen mistakes in spelling or grammar sentence structure, you have failed that competency and therefore fall to practically a 70% or a 65%. (Natalie, First Interview, Lines 144-148)*

These attitudes towards the French language exams are particularly discouraging when the exams are perceived as assumed setbacks for non-francophone students. Administrator participant Anna pointed out that some students recognize very early on that they will not be able to graduate due to the requirements of passing the French Ministry exams. Anna spoke to having to take an alternate approach with these students to keep them motivated to pass the remainder of

their courses and exams while knowingly needing to complete the supplementary adult education French requirements.

Alternative Approaches to Instruction

Professional autonomy as discussed in the literature is a prominent discussion when considering the implications of standardized assessment. The idea of *teaching to the exam* contests many 21st century teaching praxis but remains, as outlined in this study, a necessity for success on Québec's provincial exams. The below excerpts outline the frustration of both teacher and administrators around teaching to the exam:

> *So, to be able to teach outside of what the ministry is, you know, including on an exam is almost impossible because the teachers technically are teaching towards an exam. Which is a contradiction to the principles of learning that we shouldn't be teaching to an exam we should be teaching to…for the student to learn and to be able to make relevant connections with what they're doing. (Natalie, Second Interview, Lines 102-106)*

Furthermore, Claudia asserted the frustration felt when professional development days explore collaborative, exciting project opportunities but teachers are unable to enact these activities due to the reality of needing to teach to the exam. Participants reflected on the experience of navigating a time without Ministry exams and how that reflected in their classrooms. In doing so, participants spoke to how this time allowed for the opportunity to teach in a way that conveyed their teaching philosophies. Participant Linda asserted, "I felt like I could finally teach for the sheer joy of teaching. And that I could invest time in topics that were more of interest to the students like" (Linda, First Interview, Lines 569-570). Participants in the study recounted the

feeling of relief that accompanied the cancellation of Ministry exams. One participant explained what that looked like in her classroom:

> *A perfect example would be when we went on lockdown. The first time, where they had a whole week to do an assignment. So the kids would be able to submit it, you give them feedback, and then they could resubmit it. And that happened the whole week, which was wonderful! But when we came back to reality and we had to have the Ministry exam, you can't do that anymore, because you don't have time to correct and we come back and submit but if you had… didn't have that exam, it'd be a lot easier to do. (Claudia, First Interview, Lines 95-101)*

This was explored in its onset through the pandemic although the circumstances did not afford an ideal environment to do such. Since the cancellation of exams were announced late in the year, educators did not get to plan their year with this in mind but were able to share their experiences regardless. Overwhelmingly, the feeling of relief was expressed by all participants in relation to the cancellation of Ministry exams. Elyse explained that the relief associated with the cancellation of exams allowed her to change her planned curriculum through the employment of hands-on and research-based activities, while also allowing for the space to collaborate with different subjects. Similarly, Linda identified that this time allowed her the ability to choose areas of the curriculum where she wanted to develop a deeper understanding as the pressure of covering all the material was lessened.

High-stakes exams have traits that invoke both a psychological and emotional response from those writing. The stress of these exams and their effect on the future of students is commonly attributed to the downfall of this approach to assessment. Additionally, since they are formatted to be written over the course of a couple days, it is hard to mitigate the effects of any

realities a student is facing that day. It does not consider the personal and home lives of students

that could very well hinder their abilities to show their learning in the exam timeframe. Elyse

spoke to this idea through a metaphor of every student having a backpack. She explains that the

weight of the backpack is correlated to the social-emotional weight that a student may be holding

due to various life situations:

> *Because like it or not, you know, you don't know like… and I tell people they all have a*
>
> *backpack, you know? Or a school bag, you don't know what's in the school bag. Is it*
>
> *empty, full of air? Or is it full of rocks? Maybe grandma died the day before or your dog*
>
> *is sick. And you come into the exam, your headspace isn't right. And you bombed the*
>
> *exam and things happen, right? (Elyse, Second Interview, Lines 390-394)*

The data relays the attitudes of participants surrounding the content and formatting of the

exam itself and exam periods to be a point of contention with their teaching and learning

philosophies. Educators are faced with the responsibility to equip students with the tools

necessary to grow and succeed. The Ministry exams challenge the ability to do so in a way that

values the individual student. While the perceived value of standardized assessment is to provide

an equal playing field on which to assess students it does not align with the equitable approach

touted in the curriculum documents and consequently assumed by those responsible for

implementation.

Grading and Moderation

The concept of exam moderation was spoken to by participants as an area of concern.

Moderation is outlined by the Ministry as a procedure that is in place to align student final grades

to avoid unwanted variables associated with differing forms of assessment in schools by the

classroom teacher.

> Uniform examinations are administered to all students enrolled in a given course;
>
> therefore, the results on such examinations are a good indication of the performance of
>
> different classes. It is thus possible to use the marks obtained on a uniform examination
>
> to "moderate" the school marks, that is, to minimize or eliminate the impact of the local
>
> variables. (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2022b, para. 6)

This procedure is highlighted to bring greater validity to the grading system but in turn is

further standardizing the educational system by revising teacher-given grades worth the

remaining 50% of students' final grade. This remains problematic in the assumption that the

Ministry exam grade is an unwavering accurate measure of student ability and more so than their

abilities in day-to-day class. Coincidentally, this goes against Ministerial values that endorse

teachers adapting to individual student needs and ways of learning. Linda shared her frustration

regarding moderation as she believes that the success of one student should not be tied to the

success of others on an individually scored assessment. The ideas surrounding grading and

moderation amounted in perceived conflicting philosophies of learning between participants.

This was evident when students are being taught by competent individuals but assessed by

unknown entities which may sometimes call into question the abilities of the classroom teacher.

Theme 5: Ideas of Student Readiness

This theme explores the ideas of student readiness in relation to the presence of Ministry

exams. Looking to the *Threefold Mission of the School* as outlined in the QEP, the aims of the

curricular program are to: 1) provide qualifications in a changing world; 2) provide instruction in

a knowledge-based world; and 3) socialize students in a pluralistic world (MELS, 2007). In

keeping with these aims, the relevance of student readiness remained of highest importance

within the study. Through conversations with participants, student readiness developed through

two sub-themes: 1) Academic Skills, those skills with direct relation to post-secondary studies;

and 2) Life Skills, those skills relating to the workforce or social-emotional regulation.

Academic Skills

Participating in exam writing situations was a skill that participants recognized as being

necessary for post-secondary education. The degree in which its importance remained was

questioned as participants acknowledged an uncertainty of the role of exams in post-secondary

studies today. Participants explored the idea specifically throughout the pandemic time regarding

the impact exams have on students' post-secondary endeavors. As the COVID-19 pandemic

changed the typical status quo in relation to secondary assessment, we were able to discuss both

the absence of the Ministry exams in the 2020-2021 school year as well as the lower exam

weight for the 2021-2022 school year and the perceived relationship on future student success.

The complexities of this period cannot be separated to look solely at the Ministry exams and in

doing so would be counterintuitive to the changes that were widely experienced during the

pandemic. Concurrently, this time allowed the opportunity to start the conversation and to spark

curiosity around the topic. All participants agreed that it was impossible to separate the weight of

the pandemic from the impacts of the changes to the Ministry exams, but it did uncover some

perspectives surrounding this topic.

While participants believed the Ministry exams provided students with the opportunities

to be exposed to high-stakes testing before facing it in post-secondary studies, many pointed to

the perceived rigidity of post-secondary studies for this conceptualization. Participants spoke to the idea that the rigidity toward high adoption of standardized practices in post-secondary is the main proponent of the Ministry exams being considered a tool for post-secondary success. In such, both Anna and Stephen acknowledged that a flexible approach to assessment in post-secondary institutions would need to be adopted for secondary educators to feel more confident straying from the status quo. This conversation arose in response to questioning of how the absence of Ministry exams in the 2020-2021 school year will affect students moving into post-secondary education. Additionally, Anna asserted that she feels CEGEP and Universities are not prepared to lower or modify their expectations to align with the essential learning curriculum directed by the Ministry of Education.

A division was evident in the perception of academic expectations within post-secondary studies. The interviews provoked questioning regarding the amount of information that is being shared between post-secondary and secondary institutions. While the QEP aims to align student learning throughout primary and secondary studies, the integration into the post-secondary system allowed space to question how these systems are evolving with the changing times. Some participants relayed that there were some communications between CEGEPs and their schools, but most participants related their personal post-secondary experiences with their perception of current post-secondary system structures. While these considerations were likely studied in the creation of the QEP, a stronger pipeline of communication between these academic institutions would bring more clarity about the realities of post-secondary education to those preparing students in secondary schools.

Some participants relayed that they felt academic success in post-secondary would be most attributed to the general work ethic instilled in students by their secondary educators.

Natalie explains this when she said, "I think it is the work ethic, the planning that our teachers put into the learnings of our students from Sec 1 to Sec 5 that will determine how a student will perform in CEGEP" (Natalie, Second Interview, Lines 122-124). Additionally, when speaking to the idea of student readiness in the absence of Ministry exams Linda explained, "That's what I think, and the skills that they have with regards to approaching their studies, I think they will be able to carry that forward, regardless of whether they've written an exam or not" (Linda, Second Interview, Lines 342-344).

The sentiments expressed surrounding the absence of Ministry exams in relation to student readiness for post-secondary remained aligned with the previously mentioned ideas. Conversations with participants considered the concept of potential grade-inflation resulting from the pandemic. The grade-inflation phenomenon suggests the inflation of grades due to the nature of hybrid learning as well as the changes to standardized testing during this period. Participants gathered that while most students remained on the same path they had planned prior to the pandemic, post-secondary admissions requirements had become hyper-competitive. Although this was considered, participants perceived that the work ethic instilled in students would sustain them throughout their academic careers regardless of the omission of Ministry exams.

Fundamentally, Ministry exams provide students with the experience of exam writing as will be seen in future academic endeavors. The lack of transmission between secondary and post-secondary institutions is cause for concern as the use of standardized assessment is not heavily employed in all disciplines. There is a clear relationship between perceived post-secondary assessment strategies with the importance of providing students with opportunities to gain familiarity with such assessment types. While the question of ethical means of student

assessment remains, the value placed on secondary standardized assessment does not align with the realities that will face students ahead.

Life Skills

Student readiness in relation to non-academic endeavors acknowledged the necessity to equip students with the skills and tools needed to find success in both the workplace and more generally as someone integrating into adulthood in the 21st century. The realities of the workplace brought to light some of the aspects of Ministry exams that do not reflect nor provide opportunity to engage with what students will be exposed to after schooling. With overtly competitive job markets and saturation of post-secondary degree granting, a degree itself is far from enough to ensure student success.

Linda spoke to the realities of the workplace when she explained the pressure of workplace deadlines being a stressor that was in line with the pressure of Ministry exams: *And yes, I do realize that there are such things as workplace deadlines in life. But not necessarily a two-hour deadline to do seventeen things. [...] If you have like in a workplace setting, unless you go back to training for sweatshops, but I don't think that's the intent. At least I hope it's not that we've become more of a civilized society where you know, we'd like for the adults to be able to thrive in their job tasks. (Linda, Second Interview, Lines 238-251)*

Additionally, Elyse spoke to the idea that the appreciation of resourcefulness to find success in the workplace was not mirrored in the Ministry exam setting. This conversation is beginning to spark debate surrounding the conventional nature of education where previous importance was placed on rote learning of multiplication facts and extensive lexicons as exemplary skills for success. These approaches have been replaced in favor of resourceful use of

technological resources to maneuver a more time efficient process allowing for higher quality

work. Elyse and I discussed the French as a second language exams and the rigidity surrounding

dictionary use which does not reflect the realities of the workplace and the present day when

access to this information is constantly at our fingertips.

Finally, the adoption of critical thinking skills and collaboration that are admired in the

21st century workplace were reflected in relation to the Ministry exams. The rigidity of the

expectations for responses on the Ministry exams lend themselves to teachers guiding students to

respond in uniform ways although they believe it to not be conducive to workplace realities. The

idea of being able to find multiple solutions to any given task, or to collaborate critically

marrying multiple approaches to problem solving was perceived as being more in line with

workplace expectations. Claudia highlighted this sentiment when she explained her preference

for inquiry-based learning rooted in open-ended questioning. She explained that when face with

a problem in real life, there is value in finding multiple solutions and the Ministry exams do not

provide a space for students to practice that skill (Claudia, first interview).

Participants identified research skills (Elyse, first interview), critical thinking (Natalie,

first interview; Claudia, second interview), time management (Elyse, first interview; Margot,

second interview) and communication skills (Natalie, first interview; Stephen, first interview) as

crucial skills that the exams do not embody. The engagement with standardized exams is in ways

promoting student unlearning when it comes to critical learning skills previously mentioned.

Such skills cannot be taught and assessed in a rote, uniform way but instead require ample

unique experiences and opportunities to sharpen these skills that prove to be highly sought after

in the 21st century workplace.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the findings from the study through a thematic analysis of the data. The prominent themes that ensued were as follows: *Explicit Exam-Influenced Learning*, *Time Starved Schools*, *Accountability as Professional Responsibility and Pressure, Conflicting Philosophies of Learning,* and *Ideas of Student Readiness*. The union of these themes detail the prominent experiences and challenges faced through the implementation of Ministry provincial exams. The following chapter will provide a more in-depth discussion of the findings and analysis. Additionally, Chapter 5 will highlight the conclusions of the study and outline the limitations while considering recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

In this chapter, I present a discussion of the findings and analysis as well as concluding thoughts. Although in the previous chapter I created five distinct themes, the relationship between them is not as clearly defined. The discussion is constructed through accounts of educator perspectives as they inform each of the three research questions that ground my study. While conventional wisdom around thematic analysis suggests the discussion be formatted around those themes, as a researcher I made the decision to frame this chapter around the research questions to speak to the space that lies between the themes and the movement that constitutes their interconnected nature.

Discussion of Findings

This study sought to explore the conditions in which the implementation of provincial standardized exams affect teaching and learning in secondary schools as perceived by educators in the field. The research was designed to investigate and respond to the following questions: 1) What impact, if any, do standardized provincial Ministry exams have on Québec secondary instruction, according to secondary school educators?; 2) How do mandatory standardized provincial Ministry exams impact secondary school educator's teaching autonomy?; and 3) What impacts, if any, do standardized provincial Ministry exams have on student readiness for the future, according to secondary school educators? The findings of this study supported an understanding for the use of standardized assessment as a means of provincial data collection and benchmarking. The outlined implications on instructional time and content, teaching professionalization and autonomy as well as student readiness provide a space for conversation

of where improvements could be made to build a more cohesive link between curriculum

ambitions and assessment practices.

Figure 3
Theme Relationships to Research Questions
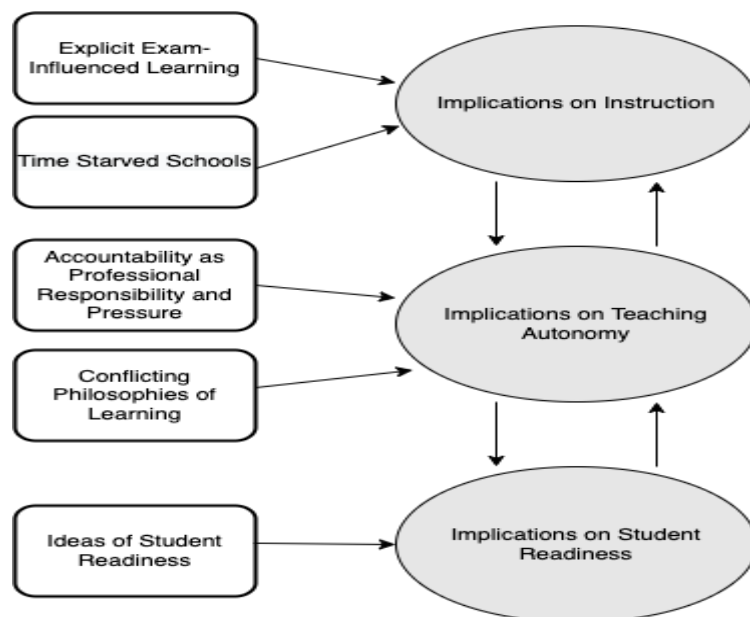
Implications on Secondary Instruction

      The findings indicate that the presence of provincial standardized exams have a vast

perceived array of negative implications on instruction in secondary schools. The literature

highlighted the fundamental divide between standardized assessment practices and current

research on student learning and achievement. Similarly, to the secondary mathematics teachers

interviewed in another study (Elbling, 2019), participants in this study noted the provincial

Ministry exams affect the course planning and timing of instructional materials relaying that

little to no time is allotted to non-tested material. The first theme outlined the rigorous routines

of exam preparation undertaken in Québec schools which, consequently, take away from the

allotted hours of instructional time. *Explicit exam-influenced learning* intertwines with the

second theme that constitutes the repercussions of exhaustive exam preparation.

The pace at which material is taught is influenced by the need to get through examined

material. Participants relayed the pressure to ensure all material is covered which limited the

ability to provide situations for development of deeper learning. This was expressed as necessary

for students in their transfer of knowledge to various future situations. Many participants

criticized the uncertainty surrounding how information will be presented on the exams which

elicits educators feeling the need to over prepare students. Study participants additionally

highlighted the rigidity of expected exam responses, which results in teachers spending time

explicitly teaching students how to respond to questions in a way that will reflect the Ministry's

expectations. The critical nature of doing so was explored through the third theme when

discussing the nature and correction of exams.

The high stakes nature of provincial Ministry exams creates pressure to teach in this

manner, and as such the consequences of not doing so could be detrimental to student success

and achievement of the secondary school diploma. The magnitude of this pressure influences the

measures taken specifically to prepare students for exams. The participants noted that there was

an overwhelming sense of relief from educators and students when Ministry exams were

canceled in 2020-2021 and with the lower grade weight in 2021-2022. The weighting of Ministry

exams at 50% of students' final course grade was a recurrent factor in the time and resources

enlisted in exam preparation. Participants relayed the necessity to teach to the test to ensure

student success in both Ministry examination periods and achievement of their high school

leaving diplomas.

Overall, the instructional implications of provincial Ministry exams stretch beyond the time allotted to exam writing periods. Exam preparation begins months preceding exam periods while many confirming it is a yearlong task. For those schools who administer mid-year exams, exam preparation extends into the first school term. While exam preparation is undeniable, it becomes problematic when a drastic divide in approaches to exam preparation and typical classroom teaching occur. Fundamentally this divide is cause for concern, although without examining the classrooms of those in charge of pedagogical implementation, it is difficult to see the implications on a deeper level of day-to-day learning.

Implications on Professional Autonomy

The idea of *test wiseness* as outlined in the literature review was clearly apparent in the findings of the study. Participants spoke to the necessity of teaching to the test as a limitation to teaching in a way that reflects their educational philosophies. This idea mirrors the theory and practice continuum that is conducive to a relevant and reliable approach to education. The aforementioned ramifications overlap deeply when considering the implications on professional autonomy. Educators spoke about teaching to the test when questioned regarding their autonomy, in that they all felt the instructional implications from the Ministry exams also inflicted on their autonomy as an educator. Participants noted that the exams were restrictive to student creativity and critical thinking. Many participants affirmed a wish to teach through problem-based learning and collaborative inquiry techniques but felt hesitancy in how that may translate into exam success. The accountability pressure outlined in the third theme provided a foundational explanation of why participants perceived their hands being tied. Reiteratively, the high-stakes

nature of the exam was to blame when the choice to deter from teaching to the exam would place students as the subject of such an experiment.

Although the Education Act in Canada places classroom assessment practices in the hands of teachers, participants acknowledged that the necessity for exam mirroring contradicts this responsibility. In relation to the nature of the exam, many participants expressed frustration in the constraints the exam put on their professional autonomy specifically when it comes to the formative nature of the exam. Educators spend approximately 180 days with their students in a school year and watch them grow over the course of that time. The provincial Ministry exams fall short at acknowledging the progression of learning that is deeply fundamental to education.

As highlighted in the fourth theme, *conflicting philosophies of learning*, participants feel helpless when word counts, strict grading guidelines and unrelated vocabulary are to blame for students falling short on the exams. While participants acknowledged the use of standardization for ethical research collection, the outsourcing of standardized grading reflects a lack of trust in teachers. Additionally, the findings relayed a frustration with moderation techniques used by the Ministry allowing for editing of class-earned grades when they do not reflect the grade on the exams. Participants expressed again the feeling of distrust when the Ministry can alter student grades in positions where they feel teachers are 'giving away grades.' While this is critical to explore in depth, the current system is fostering a confrontational authority over professional educators which does not communicate a respect of professionalization of education to educators themselves, students, or the greater public.

Fundamentally, the current state of the system does not ensue confidence in professional educators, neither their experience nor qualifications. This undoubtedly extends such a feeling of doubt to parents, stakeholders, and community members. When members of a greater

organization, and in this case the education system, are fostering distrust within their own walls they are failing at providing a high-quality service. The system cannot be fighting against itself when the mission is to provide students with valuable learning experiences.

Implications on Student Readiness

When speaking to preparation of students for future endeavors, participants noted skills of communication, problem solving, critical thinking and collaboration as valuable for future success. These skills mirror the 21st century learning skills outlined in literature as those being sought after in the workforce. In conversations around autonomy, participants spoke to alternative learning opportunities that they felt allowed students to develop these skills. Educators acknowledged alignment between student-centered approaches and their own philosophies of learning, but the time and pressure constraints imposed by the Ministry exams remained in their reasoning against enacting such practices.

Participants acknowledged that exam situations did not actively engage students in showing and developing these skills. The aged characteristics of standardized assessment not only take away from the development of valuable skills but deduct the relatability to students who struggle to understand career situations where dictionaries and peer input cannot be enlisted. Participants spoke to a perception that was not explicitly presented in the literature regarding the idea of post-secondary rigidity. Participants in the study relayed a perception that provincial Ministry exams prepared students for postsecondary exam-taking so long as institutions continue utilizing this form of assessment. This idea is particularly notable as some participants conveyed an uncertainty of how students will be assessed in postsecondary schooling which spoke to the disconnect between the two sectors. With the exceptional circumstances outlined by the COVID-

19 pandemic, this disconnect could be more detrimental if not addressed. With internationally

recognized assessments like the SATs being deemed optional for college admissions, the

magnitude of standardization will seemingly be reconsidered.

The QEP and related Ministry documents call for preparing students for an ever-changing

world although the message seems to get lost within the administration of provincial exams.

Fundamentally, a high-stakes assessment that constitutes teaching to the exam fosters a

standardized environment where research supported student-centered approaches get suffocated.

Additionally, the presence of such creates an increasingly confusing message to those

implementing curriculum at the school-level. Educators are expected to prepare students for the

21st century while ensuring cross-curricular competency development all while being

constrained to the realities of the provincial exams.

Additional Findings

Additional findings were brought up by one participant in relation to student readiness.

This participant explained that she felt the Ministry exams relayed a feeling of accomplishment

for the students. For students in rural areas who will continue their CEGEP education in

Montréal, it reassured them of their abilities to compete with local students and those who have

received a private education when exams provided them with this benchmark. These benchmarks

were acknowledged by a few participants as being a key positive aspect of the exams. This

concept of the exams for leveling the playing field was one I had not previously considered, but I

believe it holds importance. Students' perception of their educational opportunity weighs heavily

when considering the opportunities of those in densely populated areas and/or those of higher

socio-economic status.

Limitations

The following section outlines the limitations encountered while conducting this study. Initially the participant sample size was planned to be between 10-12 participants but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, voluntary participation for this study was limited as school staff had been working tirelessly to account for new realities imposed by the pandemic. The addition of participation in this study added to an already tiresome workload. With consideration of these realities, I was fortunate to have participation from multiple schools, school boards, and educational backgrounds. This afforded a more diverse perspective in the case of working with a smaller sample size.

Ethnographic traditions commonly include participant observation as a data collection method. With the constraints of the pandemic and the added stress of hybrid classrooms, I made the decision to forego this method as I would not have been able to participate as a "silent-observer" in these classes and my presence could be perceived as causing undue stress in trying times. Additionally, a perceived limitation of this study is the use of virtual interviewing. Similarly, the possibility of in-person interviewing was not enacted for this study and can be considered when evaluating the relationship building characteristics associated with face-to-face interactions. The comfort and trust of participants is of utmost importance in ethnographic interviewing and the circumstances required additional attention to uphold this throughout the virtual interview process. In saying this, the flexibility that virtual interviewing allowed gave participants the ability to choose where and when they would participate in the interview. This aided in the necessity to be least imposing on an increasingly stressful school year.

Ethnographic research traditions do not aim to generalize findings but instead highlight the experiences of its participants' unique experiences. The collection of detailed accounts is

framed within existing literature to build not only a deeper picture of broad standardized testing, but also how the location-specific nature of curriculum standards can open the dialogue regarding the realities of teaching in Québec. Although the cancellation of Ministry exams in the 2020-2021 school year gave way to a peculiar circumstance that I wished to explore, it was impossible to separate the realities of schooling amid a pandemic. We cannot make any generalizations about the realities of learning and instruction in the absence of a government-mandated standardized exam while observing this special circumstance, although we have a lot to learn from those who worked through this time.

Future Considerations

The dialogue fostered in this study is one to continue. The findings of this study shed light on the areas of provincial exams that create pedagogical conflicts on the school level of curriculum implementation. Although this study does not encompass all educator voices in Québec, it does suggest there are places to begin when aligning curricular goals and assessment practices. In saying this, I believe future research is necessary to continue the conversation and to include a larger sample size. When assessing curriculum programs, it is increasingly important to consider the perspectives of those implementing curriculum every step of the way. I believe future studies would also benefit through larger sample sizes to consider the posed questions in respect to the individual exams content. Due to the differing nature of content and language-based courses, the exams provide assessment in different ways. It would be interesting to consider a larger data set where this level of analysis could be enacted.

This study also suggests a call for professional development of assessment practices not only for the confidence of educators but to also instill Ministry trust in classroom assessment.

Workshops could be a great environment to connect teachers in assessment dialogue while also sharing experiences of exam preparation. Finally, this research calls for a critical methodology where action is enlisted from the Ministry to find solutions which would not only improve curricular cohesion but would strengthen the value of the system when all stakeholders can see the theory and practice continuum.

Conclusion

In conclusion, provincial Ministry exams were found to have several perceived implications on instruction, professional autonomy, and student readiness. When considering the implications Ministry provincial exams have on secondary instruction, the extensive exam preparation inclusive of course planning and dedicated preparation periods relayed that exam preparation extends far past the weeks leading up to the exam period. Teachers plan their school years according to the necessary content and skills needed to equip students for exam success leaving little to no time for teaching that extends past exam preparation. The weight of the exams on students' final marks creates a stressful environment for educators who perceive straying from the tested material as potentially causing ramifications on student achievement on the exams.

This intertwines with the findings surrounding teaching autonomy in that the pressure felt by the high-stakes nature of the exam conflicts with educators' abilities to teach in a way that upholds their professional autonomy. Participants expressed the conflicting philosophies in learning when speaking to aspects of the exams that do not consider the whole student or the complexities of the year-long school year. This was especially true when considering grading and moderation of the exams which do not necessarily reflect the individual students' abilities while also seemingly undermining those of the classroom teacher. Ministry provincial exams are

written in the final two years of high school and as such constitute student graduation and transition to higher education or the workforce. The idea of student readiness is critical for educators administering Ministry exams and as such the Ministry exams were considered in relation to skills and knowledge students require when leaving secondary school. When speaking to this, Ministry exams were found to prepare students well for high-stakes test-taking in post-secondary but missed the mark on creating rich experiences for students to develop valuable skills deemed necessary for academic and career success. Many participants mentioned a desire to teach using problem-based learning strategies which have been found to aid in developing critical-thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. Again, the constraints of administering high-stakes exams were to blame for not doing so.

The present study continues to enrich research on standardized assessment and educational curriculum in Québec. It provides preliminary insight of teacher and administrator perspectives and experiences in implementing provincial Ministry exams. It further considered potential causes of resistance to implementing contemporary teaching approaches. Instructional time dedicated to Ministry exams and the high-stakes nature, create a difficult environment for innovation and experimentation. It is apparent that the QEP fosters contradictory messaging to educators when the curricular goals and expectations do not align with the experiences of exam preparation and administration.

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Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

Principal Investigator:

Emma Slobodzian
MA Educational Leadership candidate
Department of Integrated Studies in Education
McGill University
(514) 550-2445
emma.slobodzian@mail.mcgill.ca

Supervisor: *Dr. Lisa Starr*
Department of Integrated Studies in Education
McGill University
(514) 398-7046
lisa.starr2@mcgill.ca

Title of Project: *When Theory and Practice Meet: The implications of standardized provincial exams in Secondary Schools in Quebec, Canada*

Sponsor(s): *N/A*

Purpose of the Study: *This study seeks to develop a deeper understanding of how standardized provincial exams affect secondary school educators. Using ethnography, this research will also serve to gain insight on how standardized exams affect student readiness for the future. While research on the effectiveness of standardized testing has been widely conducted, research on the implications of standardized testing is not as common. Situating this research in the context of 21st century learning allows for a meaningful discussion in working toward educational change.*

Study Procedures: *If you agree to voluntarily participate in this study, your participation would involve your engagement and honesty in 2-3 semi-structured interviews over the WebEx conferencing application. Each interview will be approximately 30-45 minutes. The virtual interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for coding; copies will be provided to you at your request. It is not mandatory to participate by video and participants can keep their video camera off. You can expect to commit 2-2.5 hours of time over the next three months.*

Voluntary Participation: *Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants may skip any interview questions they do not feel comfortable answering. You may withdraw or stop at any time during the study without any consequences or explanation. If you choose to withdraw during or right after the study, all information obtained up until that point will be destroyed unless you specify otherwise at the time of withdrawal. Once data has been combined for publication, it may not be possible to withdraw your data in its entirety. We can only remove your dataset from further analysis and from use in future publications. Identifiable data will be kept for 7 years.*

Potential Risks: *Although all precautions are taken, there is always the possibility of third-party interception when using communications through the internet.*

Potential Benefits: *Participation in this study will have no direct benefit for you; however, we hope to build a multi-dimensional understanding of the impact provincial standardized exams have in the school setting. By sharing your perspective, you are adding to the field of education with hopes of betterment of the Quebec learning experience.*

Compensation: *None*

Confidentiality: *You will be known to the principal investigator. The recorded audio with identifiable data such as your name and place of work will be accessed by the principal investigator only and stored as password protected files on an encrypted hard drive in the principal investigator's home for seven years following the conclusion of the research. After seven years, any and all data will be securely destroyed. Your identity will remain confidential, and you will select a pseudonym to be represented by. The recorded audio will be transcribed for coding purposes only and will not be distributed nor used for presentation. Written transcripts with no identifiable data may be shared with research supervisor Dr. Lisa Starr at McGill University. The names of schools, school boards and other identifying details mentioned in the interview will not be shared publicly.*

Dissemination of Results: *The results of this study will be disseminated through an 100-150 page thesis as a partial requirement for the degree of Masters of Arts Educational Leadership at McGill University. The presentation of this study will be given to peers and staff at McGill University. Depending on the scope and interest in the research, this study may also be submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.*

Questions: *If you have any questions or require any clarification about the project please contact the Principal Investigator, Emma Slobodzian at (514) 550-2445 or* emma.slobodzian@mail.mcgill.ca

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints about your participation in this study, and want to speak with someone not on the research team, please contact the Associate Director, Research Ethics at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca citing REB file number 21-02-042

For written consent

Please sign below if you have read the above information and consent to participate in this study. Agreeing to participate in this study does not waive any of your rights or release the researchers from their responsibilities. To ensure the study is being conducted properly, authorized individuals, such as a member of the Research Ethics Board, may have access to your information. You will need to either e-sign or scan a copy of this form and send it to the Principal Investigator by email. Please also save or print a copy for your own reference.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____   *Date:* _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview 1 Questions

        The following interviews questions will be used to initiate the conversation between principal investigator and participant.

Teacher Questions

1) How long have you been teaching in Quebec?

2) How many years have you taught courses with ministry exams?

3) Can you describe to me what ministry exam preparation looks like in your classroom?
   a. How much time do you typically spend preparing for exams?
   b. Are there certain topics or skills you feel necessary to teach to prepare for exams?

4) Tell me about a time when ministry exams impacted your instruction.

5) Could you describe the relationship (if any) between ministry exams and your teaching philosophy?
   a. In what ways do ministry exams affect your ability to adhere to your teaching philosophy?

6) Tell me about a time where you felt standardized testing affected your teaching autonomy.

7) How do you feel ministry exams affect your student's readiness for the future?
   a. Do you feel like the exams accurately assess curriculum requirements?
        (Subject area, cross curricular, broad areas of learning? (See QEP))

Administrator Questions

1) How long have you been an administrator in Quebec?

2) Can you describe to me what ministry exam preparation looks like in your school?
   a. How long do teachers and administrators spend preparing students for exams?
   b. Are there specific ways your school likes to approach exam preparation (i.e. specific skills or topics)?

3) Could you describe the relationship (if any) between ministry exams and your teaching philosophy?
   a. In what ways do ministry exams affect your ability to adhere to your philosophy as an educator and administrator?

4) Tell me about a time where you felt ministry exams affected your autonomy as an administrator.

5) How do you feel ministry exams affect your student's readiness for the future?
   a. Do you feel like the exams accurately assess curriculum requirements? (Subject area, cross curricular, broad areas of learning? (See QEP))

Interview 2 Questions

The second interviews were comprised of follow-up and clarifying questions. Participants were asked clarifying questions according to previous interview responses. Additionally, all participants were asked the following questions.

Teacher and Administrator Questions

1) Now that you've spoken with me, is there anything you wanted to add onto or revisit from our last conversation?

2) How much time do you typically allot to teaching content or skills you know will not be tested on exams?

3) In our previous interview, I asked how you felt ministry exams affected student readiness for the future. How do you feel the ministry exams affect students' readiness for post-secondary education?

4) How do you feel the cancellation of ministry exams last year will affect student success in CEGEP?

5) How do you feel the weight allocation of the ministry exams affects teaching and learning?

   a. How do you feel the changing of weight allocation of the ministry exams this year affects your teaching and curriculum implementation?